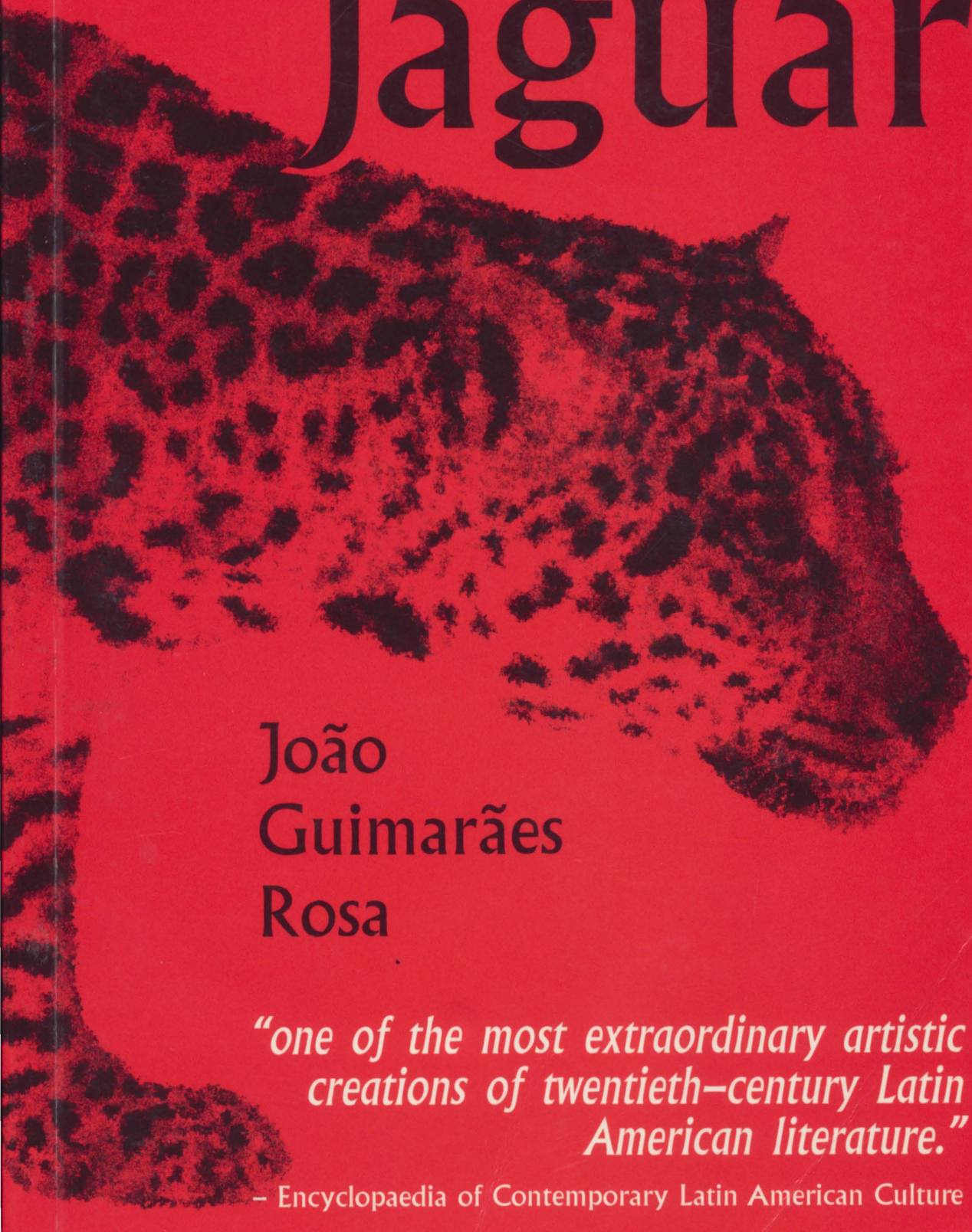


# The Jaguar



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# *The Jaguar and other stories*

by João Guimarães Rosa  
translated by David Treece

**BOULEVARD**

**The Jaguar and other stories**

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## THE AUDACIOUS MARINER SETS SAIL

It was a drizzly, misty morning, and nothing seemed to be happening at all. Everyone was gathered close by the family fireside in the open, ranch-style kitchen behind the little house. It's fine and dandy in the countryside, that's how it is. Mamma, still in her dressing-gown, was telling Maria Eva to fry some eggs and bacon and peel the ripe papayas. Mamma, the loveliest, the best. Her feet were small enough to wear Pelle's slippers. Her hair gave up an amber hush. The apples of her eye were playing with their dolls. Gypsy, Pelle and Pixie — they were chips off the same block. Zito, only Zito was an outsider; just a cousin. A wet mid-morning cloaked in shades of green: a thin, piddling bit of spray, and you might as well be prisoners stuck in the kitchen or in the house, surrounded by mud, mud and more mud. You could still make out the gully, the henhouse, the big gnarled and twisted cashew-tree, a bit of a hill — and the distance. Nurka, old black thing, was asleep. Mamma is all pride, all eyes as she takes care of the three girls and the boy. Pixie, the youngest, especially. For Pixie often got up to all sorts of tricks.

Not at this hour, though. Pixie had installed herself, as quiet as quicksilver, on the crate of potatoes. With everything crossed, one chubby little leg folded over the other, she was busying herself with her matchbox. This is how you'd see Pixie: first her hair, long, smooth, copper-blond; and, in the middle, some tiny little features: an un-long little face, a sharp little profile, a caressable little nose. At any and every moment she'd restlessly flit about and then stop to take a peek — at the drizzling and the drenching of the landscape — eyelashes like squiggles, blinkety-blink. But, she prattled on, there's not much to see through the wispieness: — *"It's raining so hard that I'm frozen!"* Then

she stretched upwards, knocking her feet against all manner of objects. — “*Ow you, ow!*” — she’d rolled over on the bunches of bananas, her belly-button showing at every turn. Pelle helped her sit up straight again. — “*...And the cashew-tree’s still flowering...*” — she added, for she’d noticed how the tree didn’t stop even when it was like this, with these days-on-end downpours, the shemozzling mizzle and the pale morning’s sky. Mamma was measuring out amounts of sugar and flour for a cake. Pelle was keenkindly helping. Gypsy was reading a book; in order to read she didn’t need to turn the pages.

Gypsy and Zito weren’t having anything much to do with each other, actually they’d been on rather bad terms since the day before, after a big nasty quarrel. Pelle was the dark-haired one, with striking eyes. Gypsy, the loveliest girl in the whole wide world: the spitting image of Mamma in miniature. Zito’s thoughts were flitting around subjects he didn’t dare say out loud, jealous thoughts, he’d got into a jealous kind of mood, and nobody and nothing was the cause. Pixie did a pirouette in the air. — “*I know why an egg’s like a spike!*” — ; she lived in the world of algebra. But she wasn’t going to tell anyone. Pixie’s like that, unshakably shrewd; an endless store of secrets. Yet she has those infiniggling bouts of fretfulness: — “*My head’s very hot today....*” — that was because she didn’t want to study. Then she adds: — “*I’m going to find out about geography.*” Or: — “*I wish I knew about love...*” It was Pelle who laughed. Gypsy and Zito look up, not quite startled. They almost, almost catch each other’s eye but don’t quite meet. Gypsy, though, who thinks she’s in the right, makes a tutting sound. Zito doesn’t want to keep up the quarrel either, he’s reached the end of his tether. If he happened to sneak a look at Gypsy, she’d suddenly fly off inside herself, looking ever lovelier.

— “If you don’t know about love, can you still read grown-up novels?” — Pixie speculated. — “You what? You can’t even read the catechism...” Pelle’s scornful little barb stung her; but Pelle never stopped being nice, really, and it was only a gentle nip, always with a smile in her voice. Pixie gibingly snaps back: — “Very funny!... Well I read all 35 words on the matchbox label...” That’s how she would try to advance certain claims, with an air of superiority and a warmth of expression that were meant to be inferred from her patter. — “Zito, is a shark demented, or is it explicit or demagogic?” Because she liked, this budding poet, to take on serious words like these, that flash glintingly and long in the darkness of our ignorance. Zito didn’t answer, suddenly desperate, quarrelsome and carping, he was day-dreaming about making a theatrical exit beneath the pouring rain, fit to burst he was so angry. But Pixie had a knack for learning such subtleties: she made them her own and reflected them in herself — what it was that made a thing something and a person someone. — “Zito, could you be the inglorious seafaring pirate, in an ever-so intact ship, way-off yonder, yonder-onder on the sea, everyone’s mariner for never-more?” Zito smiled, like a big gust of wind. Gypsy had felt a shiver, and hesitantly now she held on to the book with a few extra fingers. Mamma had given Pelle the basin, so that she could beat the eggs.

But Pixie cupped her face in her hand, excited now herself, unable to hold back the urge to tell the story: — “The Aldacious Mariner, he did infirmly go off to discover the other places. He went in a ship, and skulduggery, too. He went on his own. The places were far-off, and the sea. The Aldacious Mariner at first missed his mother, his brothers and sisters, his father. He didn’t cry. He did duly have to go. He said: — “Will you forget me?” His ship, the day came for it to leave. The Aldacious

*Mariner stood waving his white handkerchief, extrinsically, from inside the ship's going away. The ship went from being near to being far off, but the Aldacious Mariner didn't turn his back on the people, away from them. The people were actually waving white handkerchieves too. In the end, there was no more ship to be seen, there was only the sea that was left. Then one of them thought and said: — "He's going to discover the places that we're never going to discover..." Then, so then, another person said: — "He's going to discover the places, then he's never going to come back..." Then yet another one thought and thought, spherically, and said: — "So, he must be a bit angry with us, deep down, without knowing it..." Then they all cried, ever so much, and went home sadly to have their dinner..."*

Pelle raised her spoon in the air: — *"You're a very 'aldacious' little illiterate."* — *"You're the one who's the litter idiot!"* — said Pixie mischievously. *"Why are you making up silly stories, stupid fool, stupid fool?"* — Gypsy was so angry it hurt. — *"Why, so it'll turn out nice in the end!"* Nurka had barked. Was Mamma angry too? For Pixie had kicked over coffee-pots and other such things. She added, thoughtfully: — *"Better say something silly, than keep nonsense to yourself..."* Now she closed those green eyes of hers, gravely repentant for her unruly conduct. All she'll be hearing now is the pattering of the drizzle, for they must have started frying.

The morning is a sponge. But Pelle had prayed her ten prayers to Saint Anthony, while she was beating the eggs, of that there could be no doubt. For the miracle happened along quite calmly. The weather settled down. It was only March — preparing its common or garden rainshowers. Gypsy and Zito were getting quite smitten with each other. The hens were let out of the henhouse, and the turkey too. Nurka went wandering off far and wide. Was the sky turning blue again?



Mamma was going to visit the sick woman, the tenant-farmer Zé Pavio's wife. — "*So, are you accompanying us or unaccompanying us?*" — asked Pixie. So as neither to laugh nor appear inattentive, Mamma poked only gentle fun: — "*Whatever next!...*" — and hers was a voice of sweetness and vowels. It was a morning made of flowers. Then they asked permission to go and see where the stream was brimming full. Mamma let them, they weren't little girls to be tugging at her apron-strings any more. They jumped for joy. Except that someone would have to go along with them, so they wouldn't forget not to go near the dangerous waters. It's dangerous enough, there, the river. Mightn't Zito actually be that someone to go along with them, a half-grown little man, reliable and responsible? The mistiness lifted. But they had to put on some different clothes, warm ones. — "*Ah, woollies!*" Pixie, full of joy before them all, as happy as if, as if, as if: a girl, all bird. — "*God bless!*" — said Mamma, the prophetess, with that fly-away voice. She spoke, and it was showers of blessings that rained down. The little folk went their separate way.

To get there, the path first climbed, undercurvily, the slope of the dune, a hillock. Even so, both umbrellas. Under one — up ahead — Pixie and Pelle. Beneath the other, Zito and Gypsy. Just the remains of the rain, drizzle dribbling. Nurka ran blackly about and eventually came back, lucky as a cork that's popped. If you turned around, you could see the house, nice and white with its greeny-blue stripe, the littlest and loveliest of all, of all. As Zito offered his arm to Gypsy, quite often, very often, their hands met. Pelle was growing in stature, in elegance. And Pixie stepped nimbly on, in her coleopteral coat. She walked with her toes turned inward, like a fearless little parakeet.

Across the top of the dune, Zito and Gypsy kept silent, in the twists and turns, the unspeaking, moving

moments. Yes, now they were at peace with each other, making this experience of happiness their own; for them, the walk was about feelings. Everyone was climbing down the other slope now, treading carefully on account of the muddying and the slippishness, the puddles, but also in order not to step in what Pixie called “bovine business” — coils of mushroomy manure piled high. Cattle did indeed walk about those slopes: “*the moo-cow’s moosh*”; and just then, Pixie fell over. She said that Mamma had told them what they needed was: courage and common sense. But that was all fibs. So what, then: — “*Now that I’ve got dirty, I don’t have to be careful any more...*” She ran with Nurka down the lower slope, over the lush green pasture. Pelle had another go at her: — “*Are you going to look for an audacious mariner?*” But that wasn’t all. For meanwhile, in the damp, in the light, in the even grass — something burst into bloom: stretching on and on, it was the daisies, rudely roused, bleary-eyed, encircled by eyelids.

What they were after, here, was the little creek where the stream flows into the river. Down below, under the fine bamboo trees, and in the riverside quarries, listening to the water’s roaring and grumbling. For the swollen river is all misshapen mischief, the stream too, mind you, its mouth awfully full, gathered up, pent up, seething — the rumble of the tidal backwash. — “*Puffy-cheeks!*” — Pixie shouts at it. Its last traces of sand disappeared beneath the dancing flannel of foam, lost in lovely sweet nothings, a babble of bubbles. Pixie saw it all from memory already. She pushed in bamboo canes to mark and measure the water as it increased and rose higher. But all that turmoil brought back bad memories, for Pixie didn’t like the sea: — “*The sea doesn’t have a shape to it. The wind won’t let it. The size of it...*” She regretted not bringing any bread for the fish. — “*Fish around this time, when it’s like this?*” —

doubted Pelle. Pixie rambled on: — *“The waterfall’s a wall of water...”* She said that that there, in the river, up ahead, was Alligator Island. — *“Have you ever seen an alligator there?”* — teased Pelle. — *“No. But you’ve never seen the alligator-not-being-there either. You just see the island. So, the alligator might be there and it might not...”* — But Pixie, with Nurka beside her, had seen it all, standing there looking about her, her two little eyes like birds. As a matter of fact, the rising and spreading of the water were taking their time, what with all those thousand-and-one superfluous little movements.

They sat down nearby, but not on the ground or on a fallen tree-trunk, on account of the damp from the rainfall. Gypsy and Zito on a rock, which only had room for two, they could have carried on for endless hours; still just chatting like ordinary folk. Pelle had gone off to pick a bunch of flowers. It wasn’t drizzling any more. Pixie was hopping up and down again. She said that this was a very storytelling day. She turned towards the opposite bank, coloured the greenest green, and started throwing pebbles as far as she could, for Nurka to run and fetch. Then she crouches down to pass the time, it looks as though she’s only wearing one little shoe. But, without coming out of her squat she suddenly spins round on her feet, she wants Gypsy and Zito to listen. She looks at them.

— *“The Aldacious Mariner didn’t like the sea! Did he really have to leave? He loved a young lady, who was thin. But the wind got up on the sea, and took away his ship with him inside, scrutiny. The Aldacious Mariner couldn’t help it, it was just the sea, naughty all around, preliminary. The Aldacious Mariner remembered the young lady a lot. Love is original...”*

Gypsy and Zito smiled. The two of them laughed. — *“Lord! Are we still on that subject?”* — it was Pelle

who had got back, shielding herself behind a handful of flowers. Pixie pulled a face and went “*oh!*” and decided to carry on: — “... *Along comes the crew... No, not then. Later, it rained and rained. The sea filled up, the scheme, lion-tamer... The Audacious Mariner didn't know which way to run and get away, faced with this, and the ship smashed up. The ship parabulated... He, being afraid, intact, he didn't hardly have any time to think much about the young lady again, that he loved, circumspect they were. He just kept prevaricating... Love is singular.*”

— “*So what?*”

— “*The young lady was parallel there, far away, alone, left behind, and what's more the two of them were at opposite ends of missing each other... Love, that's to say... The Aldacious Mariner, it was total, titular danger... there was no salvation... Aldacious... Aldacious...*”

— “*Yes. And what next? What about it?*” — Pelle demanded of her.

— “*What about it? Then... then... I'm going to explain it all! Right. Then he lit the light on the sea. So there. He had it all arranged with the lighthouse man... Right. And...*”

— “*No-oo. It doesn't count! You can't make up a new character at the end of the story, bah! And — take a look at your 'aldacious mariner', over there. That's him...*”

They looked. That one: it was him — bovine business, heaped up, piled high, half-dried, rustic doings on the muddy ground and amongst the blades of grass — left flattened. On its peak had grown a mushroom with a very long and slender, willowy stalk: its little white cap, aloft, swayed impudently. Already, the lapping and slapping of the floodwater were almost reaching it.

Pixie made a face. But at that, Pelle's spray of flowers came apart, and some of the flowers fell on the



ground. — “Ah! *That’s right, that’s it!*” — and Pixie was leaping busily about, quick to avail herself of the opportunity. She’d picked up those little yellow flowers — dandelions, buttercups, daisies — and she went and stuck them in the thing’s crown — *Aren’t there any blue flowers today?*” she enquired. It was everyone’s turn to laugh, and Gypsy and Zito clapped their hands together. — “*Right then. It’s the Aldacious Mariner...*” — and Pixie pushed all sorts of other things into it — bamboo leaves, little branches and twigs. That stuff, the “bovine business”, was turning into something else now.

But then a distant rumbling made itself heard: a roll of thunder shifting its furniture about. Pixie is ever so afraid of thunder. She draws closer to Zito and Gypsy. And Pelle. Gentle Pelle. Who asks: — “*Well then? Isn’t there any more to the story? Has it dried up?*”

— “*All right, then. I’m going to start again. The Aldacious Mariner, he loved the young woman, all over again. Right. He suddenly felt ashamed about being frightened, and got up his courage, unscared himself. He took an almighty leap... He grabbed the young lady, from way off, in his embrace... Right then. It was the sea that got thrown into confusion. Gwaahn! There, the Aldacious Mariner. Now it really is finished: there, I’ve written it — ‘The End!’*”

In fact, the water was getting close to the “Aldacious Mariner” now, slapping against him for the first time — “*Is he going out to sea?*” — asked Pixie anxiously. She had been on her feet for a long time. A breeze makes her mime its babble — caressing her face, yes, her lips, and her ears, her hair. Far off, held back, the rain.

Whispering, Gypsy and Zito regard each other, on the very cusps of reality. — “*It’s so nice today, isn’t it? Everything, everyone so fine, everybody happy... I love this*

weather ...” And: — “*Me too, Zito. Are you going to keep coming back here, lots?*” And: — “*God willing, I will...*” And: — “*Zito, would you be able to do like the Aldacious Mariner did? Go off and discover the other places?*” And — “*Maybe he went because the other places are even nicer?...*” The two then told each other big things like this, in small words, you to me, me to you, and on like that. Although happy, something else was stirring confusedly in them — like rose-love-thorns-longing.

But the “Aldacious Mariner”, by now the water was hurrying along in its ebb and flow, its frothicking already reaching around, beginning to drench him. There he was, all circumnavigable, yet still on *terrestria firma*: the ground was still holding him back from breaking away and leaving. Pixie adds to his decorations. Even Gypsy and Zito go about helping her. And Pelle. He’s something else, colourful, outlandish, leaves and flowers — “*He’s going to discover the other places...*” “ — *No, Pixie. Don’t joke about serious things!*” “ — *Eh, what?*” Then Gypsy, who’s all thoughtful, suggests: — “*Shall we send a message with him?*” Send something, just for the time being, out to sea. They’re all in favour of that. Zito puts on a coin. Gypsy, a hair-clip. Pelle, a piece of chewing-gum. Pixie — a little gob of spittle; that’s “her style”. What about the story? Might there still be time to recount the true story? Well then:

— “*Now I know. The Aldacious Mariner didn’t go on his own; there! But went aboard with the young lady who he, they, loved each other, they boarded the ship, precisely that. So there. The sea went along with them, aesthetically. They were going but not alone, on the ship, that was growing lovelier and lovelier, the ship... there: and it turned into a glow-worm...*”

There. The awful thunder, in the heavens as it is on earth, invincible. The sky darkened. Pixie and the thunder

get all caught up in each other. Would she fall into an “intact” abyss — the under of the thunder? Nurka came barking to her rescue. Gypsy, and Pelle and Zito, too, came to help out. First, though, someone else appeared unexpectedly, fairy-like, a flower in her defence.

— “*Mamma!*”

She threw her arms around her neck. Mamma nibbled her little head, like a squirrel going at a nut. Pixie gets the giggles not the squiggles. Then Pelle:

— “*Look! Now! There goes the ‘Aldacious Mariner’!*”

— “*Hey!*”

— “*Oh!*”

Aldacious! He was setting sail. Floating side to side, bob-bobbing, the foam and water carried him off, the Aldacious Mariner, forever flushed away, down, down. His foliage, his flowers and the long, jaunty mushroom with a dewdrop atop, a little drop, shining on — at the pinnacle of a dried cow-pat.

Pixie feels moved, too. It’s as the moving stops, though, that she says: — “*Mamma, now I know something else: the only thing an egg really is like, is a spike!*”

The rain starts up again.

And so the umbrellas unfurled their wings.

## THE BOUNDS OF HAPPINESS

Here's the story. A little boy was off to spend a few days with his Aunt and Uncle in the place where the big city was being built. It was a journey conceived in the glow of happiness; to him, it was all happening as if in a dream. They left while it was still dark and the air was sharp with unfamiliar smells. His Mother and Father drove him to the airport. His Aunt and Uncle took charge of him, exactly as arranged. Smiles and greetings were exchanged, everyone was listening and talking to each other. The plane was a special four-seater belonging to the Company. They answered all his questions, even the pilot chatted to him. The flight would take just over two hours. The little boy was humming with the thrill of it all, contentedly chuckling away to himself, as comfy as could be, like a leaf floating on the air. Life could sometimes shed its light on an extraordinary truth. Even the way they fastened his safety belt turned into something else, a strong, protective caress, and then a new sense of expectation: of the unknown, of something more. A swelling, as it were, and a feeling of release — as sure as the act of breathing — so was this flight into blank space. The Little Boy.

And everything arrived with a delicious suddenness, following some prearranged harmony working in unison towards the greater good: the satisfaction of needs before there was any awareness of them. They gave him his pick of sweets and gum. Good-humouredly attentive, Uncle showed him how his seat was reclinable — you just had to press a lever. His seat was by the window, looking out over a world on the move. They handed him magazines to leaf through, as many as he wanted, a map too, and pointed out where they were from one moment to the next, above which places. The Little Boy left them piled up on his lap, and



peered out: the clouds heartily heaped up, the blue that was air and nothing else, that endless clear sky, the flat ground laid out like a map, divided up into farms and fields, green merging into yellows and reds and into brown and green again; and further off, low down, the mountains. How come men, children, horses and cows — like bugs? They were flying supremely high. Now the Little Boy was really living; his happiness sent everything nasty on its way. There he was, sitting safe and sound, inside the soft humming of the plane: that good, hardworking toy. He hadn't even noticed that he was actually going to feel hungry, and Auntie was already offering him sandwiches. And Uncle was promising him all the many things he was going to play and see, and do and go to, as soon as they got there. The Little Boy had everything all at once, and nothing, before him in his mind. The light, and the cloud going on-and-on-and-on. They were arriving.

## II

As morning hovered on the brink. The big city was just beginning to take shape, in a semi-wasteland, on the plateau: magical monotony, rarefied air. The landing field was a short way from the house — made of timber, on stilts, nearly nosing its way into the forest. The Little Boy was gazing and glimpsing. He was breathing heavily. He wanted to be able to see even more vividly — so many new things — what was taking shape before his eyes. It was a small dwelling, you went straight into the kitchen and through to what was not exactly a yard, rather a short clearing out of the trees, for they're not allowed indoors. Tall trees, lianas and little yellow orchids dangling from them. Could it be that Indians, wildcat, the lion, wolves, hunters would come

out of there? No, just sounds. First one bird — then others — with songs that went on and on. And it was this that unlocked his heart. Did those little birdies drink rum? Heavens! For that was when he spotted the turkey, in the middle of the yard, between the house and the trees in the forest. The turkey imperiously turned its back on him, ready to receive his admiring gaze. Its tail burst open, swelled up and unfurled in a fan: a scraping of wings on the ground — brisk, stiff — and it had announced itself. It gobbled, shaking its bulbous cluster of ruddy fruits; and there were light blue, pale patches on its head, that came from the sky, from the tanager-bird; and there it was, complete, finely turned and rounded, all spheres and smooth surfaces, with metallic green glints in black-and-blue — forever the turkey. Handsome, so handsome! He had a warmth, a power about him, and something flower-like, brimming over. His querulous, thunderous grandeur. His florid, swollen pride. He was a feast for the eyes, meant for the sounding of trumpets. Irascible, heavy with fruit, strutting about, he gobbled a gobble again. The Little Boy laughed with all his heart. But he only got a peep of a glimpse. They were calling him now, to go for a walk.

### III

They were travelling by jeep, headed for where the Boxwood farmstead would be. The Little Boy said the name of each thing over and over to himself deep inside. The dust, auspicious. The field mallow, the mastic trees. The white croton, velvety. The grass snake, crossing the road. The arnica: in pale candelabras. The angelic apparition of the parrots. The myrtle-berries and their drip-dripping. The field deer: its white tail. The ostentatious purplish flowers

of the ostrich-cinnamon. What Uncle said: that there was a “mess of partridges”. The flock of seriemas, further off, flying away in indian file. The pair of herons. That broad, broad landscape, which got flooded by the sun. The buriti palm, beside the little stream where they got stuck for a moment. Every single thing, from out of the opaqueness. All this fuelled his unceasing joy, joy of a kind that was dreamy, gulped down in fresh surges of love. And there in his memory were castles already pieced together, in pure perfection. Everything, ready to be duly discovered in its own time, had first been made to seem strange and unfamiliar. He was afloat in the air.

He thought about the turkey as they made their way back. Just for a little, so as not to use up, at the wrong time, the heat of that memory, of that all-important thing waiting in store for him in the yard, in the clearing out of the wild woods. He’d only been allowed to have it for one great, fleeting, lingering moment. Could it be there was one like that in every house, one for each person?

They were hungry, lunch was served, they drank their beer. Uncle, Auntie, the engineers. From the living room, couldn’t you hear his genteel chiding, his gobbling? This big city would be the tallest in the world. He was unfurling himself, puffing out, bursting open, swelling up... He hardly ate any dessert, the home-made quince, so lovely when you cut it down, scented in sugar and flowery flesh. He left the table, eager to see him again.

He didn’t see him: not straight away. The woods were so horrible and tall. So — where? Just a few feathers, some remains, on the ground. — “*Oh dear, it’s got killed. Isn’t it your birthday tomorrow, sir?*” The eternity and certainty went out of everything; in a puff, in a flash, you were robbed of the loveliest things. How could they? Why so suddenly? If only he’d known it was going to turn out that way, he

would at least have looked longer at the turkey — at that turkey. The turkey — its disappearing into thin air. In the insignificant seed of a minute, the Little Boy had absorbed a milligram of death. They were coming for him now: — “*Let’s go to where the big city is going to be, and the lake...*”

#### IV

He shut himself solemnly away within a kind of weariness, an abandonment of all curiosity, so as not to be carried along by his thoughts. Just keep moving. He would be ashamed to speak of the turkey. Perhaps he shouldn’t, maybe it wasn’t right to feel that hurt because of it, that hurt that pushes into you and stings, with grief, sorrow and disillusionment. But there again, for them to have killed it seemed to him like a mistake in some obscure way. He felt more and more tired. He could barely manage to look at the things they were showing him now, in the saddening-all-around: the skyline, men at work on the levelling, the gravel trucks, the fuzzy trees, a stream of grey water, the field-croton just a faded plant, the dead enchantment devoid of birds, the dust-filled air. His weariness, made of stifled emotion, was working up a secret fear: he was discovering how other adversities were possible in the world of machines, in the hostile space between; and how, between contentment and disillusionment, in that most treacherous balance, there is almost no gap at all. He bowed his little head.

There the great floor of the airport was being manufactured — across the wide, open space the bulldozers, dumper trucks, steam-rollers were moving back and forth, the piledriver pounding with its crusher teeth, the asphalt-maker. And how had they managed to cut down the forest



there? — asked Auntie. They showed her the tree-felling machine that was there too: with a thick blade at the front, like a snowplough, a kind of axe. Did she want to see? They pointed to a tree: ordinary, nothing unusual about it, at the fringe of the forested area. The little tractor-driver-man had a cigarette-butt in his mouth. The thing got moving. Straight ahead, quite slowly really. The tree, not many branches at the top, young, light-coloured bark... and all it took was that knock: *buughh*... in that instant it fell right over, right over. It had clipped it so beautifully. So that you couldn't even catch with your eyes the moment it hit — the unbelievable crash — the powerful blow it struck. The Little Boy grimaced. He looked up at the sky — startled blue. He was shaking. The tree, that had done so much dying. Its clean, slender trunk and the sudden, final rustling of its branches — there, where it was all nothingness. Hidden away inside the rock.

## V

Once back at the house, he didn't want to go out again into the yard, all that was there was an abandoned longing, a vague remorse. He didn't really know himself. His little mind was still in its hieroglyphic phase. But he did go out, after dinner. And — an unspectacular surprise, it was — he saw it, to his mild amazement: the turkey, right there! Ah, no. It wasn't the same one. Smaller, a lot less big. It had its piece of coral, its tail feathers, its comb, its gabbled gobbling, but missing from its uncomfortable elegance was the haughty composure, the rounded completeness, the taut beauty of the first one. In any case, its arrival and presence were something of a consolation.

All was soothed in sadness. Until the day; that's to say:

the coming of the night. Yet, that climb into nightfall is ever and patiently thus, everywhere. The silence crept out of its precious hiding-places. The Little Boy, in his fearfulness, found a calm in his very depression: some force within him was working to put down roots and swell his soul.

But the turkey was striking out towards the edge of the forest. There it had sensed — what? Scarcely anything could be seen, in the glooming. And then it was there, the other's decapitated head, thrown onto the rubbish heap. The Little Boy grieved and thrilled.

But: no. The turkey had not been attracted there unerringly out of comradely, sorrowful sympathy. It was moved by a kind of hatred. It seized that other head and pecked at it ferociously. The Little Boy didn't understand. The forest, the trees, blacker than black, they were heaps too big; the world.

Darkness reigned.

Yet something was flying about, that flash of green, from right out of the forest, the first glow-worm. Yes, the glow-worm, yes, and it was lovely! — so tiny, in the air for just an instant, high up, in the distance, going on its way. Here, once upon another time, was Happiness.

## Back into the distance

Once upon another time. So, again the Little Boy was travelling to the place where the thousands and thousands of people were making the big city. He only had his Uncle with him this time, though, and it was a steep takeoff. Bewilderedly he'd boarded the plane, stumbling about all over the place, snugly swathed from within by something warming like weariness; he just pretended to smile when they spoke to him. He knew that his Mother was ill. That's why they were sending him away, doubtless for days and days, doubtless because it was necessary. That's why they'd wanted him to bring his toys, his Auntie personally handing him his favourite one, the one that brought him luck: a little monkey-doll, dressed in brown trousers and a red hat with a tall feather. It used to belong on the bedside table, in his bedroom. If it could have moved, been alive like a person, then it would have been the most priceless, the cleverest one in the whole wide world. The Little Boy grew more and more fearful as the others were kinder and kinder towards him. If Uncle jovially encouraged him to peep out of the window or pick out some magazines, he knew Uncle wasn't being altogether sincere. There were other frights in store. If his mind were to turn to the memory of his Mother, he would start crying. Mother and suffering couldn't fit all at once in the space of the moment, together they made up the wrong side of things — the awfulness of the impossible. He didn't quite understand this, everything changing now inside his little head. Was that it: was there something, bigger than everything else, that might happen, that was going to happen?

There was no point in looking out, the overlapping

clouds racing far off in opposite directions. And besides, wasn't everyone acting sadly, even the pilot, and just fibbing about everything being normal and happy? Uncle, wearing a green tie, cleaning his glasses on it, surely he wouldn't have put on such a nice tie, if there had been a threat of danger to Mother. But a germ of remorse was growing in the Little Boy, because he had in his pocket the funny little monkey-doll, always the same, just a toy, with its tall feather on the little scarlet hat. Should he throw it away? No, the little monkey in the brown trousers was doing its bit, too, as his tiny playmate, and didn't deserve to be mistreated. He just removed the little hat with the feather, and did throw that away, now it was all gone. And the Little Boy was there deep inside himself, in some little corner of himself. He was way, way back. He, the poor little chap in his seat.

How he wished he could sleep. They should be able to stop being so wide-awake, when need be, and sleep safe and sound. But he couldn't manage to. He had to open his eyes again all the time, to see the clouds toying with their ephemeral sculptures. Uncle was looking at his watch. So when would they get there? Things all stayed more or less the same, the whole time, one lot of things or another. Not people, though. Did life never stop, so that you could live properly, with everything nice and settled? Even the little hatless monkey would come to know, just as he had, about the size of those trees, the forest adjoining the yard at the house. Poor little monkey, so small and alone, so motherless; he squeezed him, in his pocket, the monkey seemed to be grateful, and there inside, in the dark, he wept.

But what about Mother, for happiness only came in brief moments. If he'd only known Mother would one day fall ill, then he'd always have stayed by her side, watching over her, ever so hard, knowing, knowing for sure he'd be there watching over her so, so hard, oh... He wouldn't have played

either, not ever, or done anything else, except stay close by her, so as not to be separated from her, not even to take a break, and there'd be no need for anything at all to happen. Just the way it was now, in his mind's heart. The way he was feeling: with her, more than if they'd actually, really been together.

The plane went on and on crossing the huge clear sky, flying its flight — so that it was as if it were standing still. But black fish were flying past in the air, beyond those clouds, for sure: backs and claws. The Little Boy suffered in stifled silence. If only the plane really were standing still now as it flew — more than that, going backwards, and he together with his Mother, so that he'd never even found out, back then, that things could be this way.

### Appearance of the bird

At the house, which hadn't changed a bit, in and out of the trees everyone began treating him in a caring kind of way. They said it was a pity there weren't any other little boys around. Yes, he would have given them his toys; he didn't want to play, ever again. While you were carelessly playing, bad things were getting ready to unleash a raging fury: waiting for you behind closed doors.

He didn't feel like going out in the jeep with his Uncle, either, if it meant all that dust, people, and earth. He held on tight, his eyes shut; Uncle said he shouldn't grab hold so tightly and stiffly, but let his body move with the car as it lurched this way and that. What if he got ill, too, with something or other — how would it be, would he be closer to Mother, or further away? He gnawed away at his heart. He didn't even want to talk to the little monkey-doll. The whole day was given over to his drifting off into weariness.

Even so, he couldn't get off to sleep at night. The air in that place was chilly, more rarefied. The Little Boy felt scared, lying there, his heart pounding away. Mother, that's to say... And then he couldn't get to sleep, and there was the reason. The dead quiet, the darkness, the house, the night — everything was moving slowly on towards the next day. Even if you wanted it to, nothing could stop, or go back to what you knew, and liked. He was alone in his room. But the little monkey-doll wasn't the one from his bedside table any more: he was his playmate, on the pillow, lying face up with his legs stretched out. His Uncle's room was next-door, the wall between was thin, made of wood. Uncle was snoring. The little monkey might almost be, too, like a very old little boy. Could it be they were stealing something from the night?

And when the next day came, between no-longer-sleeping and not-yet-being-awake, something would flash clear in the Little Boy's mind, gently, airily — like a gust of wind. Almost like watching someone else's remembered certainties; just like a kind of movie of some unknown person's thoughts; as if he were able to copy into his mind a grownup's ideas. To the point where they would fray away at the edges and disappear off into the air somewhere.

But in that dawning of the light, there was something he knew and believed: that you could never, properly, enjoy the things that happened, not even the nice or the good ones. Sometimes, because they came quickly and unexpectedly one after the other, and you weren't even ready for them. Or else they were expected, and then they didn't taste as good, they were just a pale imitation. Or else because the other things, the bad ones, kept on coming from all sides, and there wouldn't be any room left. Or else because there were still other things missing, that had happened on different occasions, but that needed to come together with

those first ones to make it all complete. Or else because, even when they were happening, you knew they were already moving on and would end up ground down, crumbled away to nothing by the hours that passed... The Little Boy couldn't stay in bed a minute longer. He was up and dressed, and was grabbing his little monkey and stuffing it in his pocket, he was hungry.

The porch was a passage-way between the little yard where the woods were and the other-side stretching on and on — that dark countryside beneath torn ribbons of mist like shards of ice, and little pearls of dew: on as far as the eye could see, to the eastern skyline, on the far horizon. The sun hadn't yet come up. But the day-glow. The treetops were turning a golden colour. The tall trees beyond the clearing, even greener after they'd been washed by the dew. Half-morning — and everything giving off an aroma, and birds chirruping. They were bringing coffee out from the kitchen.

And: — “*Psst!*” — a finger pointed. With a gentle, sidelong crash a toucan had landed on one of the trees. So close! The blue above, the tree-tops, the yellow glow all around and the bird's soft shades of red, so many — after his flight. You just had to see him: big and bejewelled, his bill resembling an orchid. He hopped from branch to branch, feeding off the fruit-laden tree. The light was all his, its colours spattered wide as he leaped into the air ridicadaisically from one moment to the next, resplendently spell-bound. At the top of the tree, where the berries were, touck-touck... and then he'd clean his bill on the branch. And the Little Boy, all goggle-eyed, couldn't hold on to the justjoyful instant, except in the hush between one-two-three. Where no one was speaking. Not even Uncle. Uncle, too, was of a mind to savour the pleasure of that moment: cleaning his glasses. The toucan would stop to listen to

other birds — his chicks, maybe — over towards the forest. His big bill uplifted, he in his turn would let out that rusty-sounding cry toucans make, once, or twice in a row: — “*Krreah!*”... The Little Boy on the verge of tears. All the while, the cockerels crowed. The Little Boy tried to recall the memory but there was no memory. A moistness filled his eyelashes.

And the toucan, in its straight, slow flight — how he flew off, *shoo, shoo!* — colours hovering, dashingly demanding to be stared at; then just a dream. But their desire to keep watching didn’t cool. Now they were pointing towards the great expanse on the other side. Where the sun wanted to come out, in the region of the morning star. The edge of the fields, dark like a low wall, began to break open at one point, in a golden gash fringed with splinters. Out of that spot, gently edging ever so slightly upwards, floated the half-sun, its disc, its smooth shape, the sun, light everywhere. Now it was that golden ball hovering by a thread in the blue. Uncle looked at his watch. All that time, and the Little Boy didn’t even cry out. With his eyes he was catching every syllable on the horizon.

But he hadn’t been able to match up this dizzying moment with the ever-present memory of his Mother — healthy, oh, no illnesses, just happy the same as always and there she’d be. And his train of thought wasn’t swift enough for him to take his playmate, the little monkey-doll, out of his pocket, so that he could see too: the toucan — the little red gentleman clapping his hands, his bill straight out in front of him. But as if, at each and every little bit of his flight, he were stopping still in the space, the impossible tininess of that spot that wasn’t even in the air — now, unendingly and forever.



## The bird's work

So, from one day to the next, the Little Boy battled in his despondency with that thing he didn't want to wish for in himself. He couldn't bear to take things on in all their rawness, the way they are, and the way they always become: heavier, more thing-ish — when looked at unwarily. He was afraid to ask for news; was he afraid of seeing his Mother in the mean mirage of sickness? Struggle as he might, he couldn't think backwards. If he tried to call to mind his Mother as sick, unwell, he couldn't manage to connect up his thoughts, everything in your head went blurry. Your Mother was your Mother, and that was that; end of story.

But, he could wait; for something beautiful. There was the toucan — immaculate — in flight and at rest and in flight. Heading, in the morning again, right for that tree with the high canopy, a species actually called the toucan-tree. And daybreak came, taking a deep, golden breath. Each dawn, at just the same time, the toucan, noble, full-throated:... *comingcomingcoming*... — flying a straight, low, swooping path traced gently through the air, just like a little red toy ship slowly flapping its sails as it's pulled along; gliding so surely it could be a duckling skating along across the water's golden light.

After the magic, you got into the ordinary, main part of the day. Other people's, not yours. The bumps and jolts in the jeep made up the most consistent train of events. Mother had always recommended taking extra-special care with his togs; but the soil here was too trying. Oh, it was the little monkey-doll, even when he always kept him in his pocket, who got dirtiest with sweat and dust. All those thousands and thousands of men were working ever so hard to make the big city.

But without fail, the toucan happened along in its habitual way, everyone there was accustomed to it turning up as dawn broke. It was more than a month now since this had started. First, a squawking flock of about thirty of them had appeared in the vicinity, but in the day-time, between ten and eleven o'clock. However, only that one had stayed behind to greet each daybreak. His eyes sluggish and giddy with sleep, his little monkey-doll in his pocket, the Little Boy hurriedly got out of bed and went down to the porch, keen to share his love.

His Uncle spoke to him, awkwardly overdoing his effort to please. They left — on the trail of things about to happen. The dust had sealed over everything. One day the little monkey-doll ought to be able to get another little hat with a tall feather; but a green one, the colour of that very loud tie that Uncle, in his shirt, wasn't now wearing. To the Little Boy, at every moment it seemed as though just one particular part of himself was unwillingly being pushed forward. The jeep raced along endless roads that were always new. But the Little Boy declared this, and only this, in his strongest of hearts: that his Mother had to get better, she had to be safe!

He'd wait for the toucan, which would arrive on the dot, promptly, right on time, at twenty past six in the morning; it stayed, doing its tree-business up in the canopy of the toucan-tree, fossicking about among the berries, ten minutes of feeding and hopping, no more, no less. With that it would leave, always off-the-other-way, in the just-before the drip-dropping split-second as the ruddy sun rose roundly off the ground; for the sun's time was half-past-six. Uncle timed everything by his watch.

It didn't come back during the day. Where on earth was it from, where did it live — the shadows in the forest, the impenetrable places? No one knew what its real habits were,

or its exact movements: the other places where it must find things to eat and drink, in isolated spots. But the Little Boy thought how that was just the way it should be — no one should know. It came from the different place, the somewhere place, that was all. The day: the bird.

Meanwhile, Uncle, who'd received a telegram, couldn't help looking apprehensive — the ageing of hope. But anyway, whatever it was, the Little Boy, keeping silent, stubbornly single-minded in his love, just repeated over and over: Mother was healthy and well, Mother was safe!

Suddenly he heard that, in order to console him, they were arranging some means of catching the toucan: with a trap, throwing a stone at its beak, a rifle shot at its wing. No, no, no! — he cried angrily, quite distraught. If he had imaginings, desires, then they were not of that toucan, captive. But the thin early morning light, and within it, the bird's unerring flight.

The interval — something he could understand now in his heart. Before the day after. Then, every time the bird, its dawning, came it was like getting a toy for free. Just like the sun: out of that dark spot on the horizon, suddenly shattering into a blaze of light like the shell of an egg — at the bounds of the countryside's flattened, obscure enormity, where your gaze swept forward like an arm reaching out.

Uncle, meanwhile, walking ahead of him, stopped without a word. The Little Boy couldn't and wouldn't understand there could be any danger. There within his being, over and over he said: that Mother had never even been sick, she'd been born safe and sound forever! The bird's flight was occupying a bigger and bigger place within him. He'd almost dropped and lost the little monkey-doll: his little beaky mouth and half his body sticking sneakily out of his pocket! The Little Boy hadn't given him a telling-off. The bird's return had conveyed pure emotion, an

affecting impression, an overflowing of the heart. The Little Boy stored it away in the evanescence of memory, in joyful flight, in the air's vibrations, until the afternoon. So that he might draw on it to console himself and ease his pain, by escaping the constricting embrace — of those chequered days.

On the fourth day, a telegram arrived. Uncle smiled a big, broad smile. Mother was fine, she was cured! The next day — after the toucan's very last sun-up — they would return home.

### The immeasurable moment

And before long the Little Boy was peering out through the cabin window at the clouds' white unravelling, the speeding nothingness. In this meanwhile he lingered in his longing, still loyal to the things back there. The toucan and the dawn, but everything, too, from those days that had been so much worse: the house, the people, the forest, the jeep, the dust, the breathless nights — all that was growing more rarefied, now, in the near-blue of his imagining. Life really never did stop. Uncle, wearing another tie, that wasn't the ever-so pretty one, was in a hurry to get there, looking at his watch. The Little Boy daydreamed, nearly in the borderland of drowsiness. A sudden seriousness made his little face grow long.

And, almost leaping up, he had a fit of anguish: the little monkey-doll was gone from his pocket! He couldn't have lost his little playmate monkey!... How had that been possible? His eyes quickly filled with tears.

But then the pilot's second-in-command came and brought him something, by way of consolation: — "*Take a peek at what I've found for you*" — and, all unruffled, it

was the little red hat with the tall feather that he, the other day, had thrown right away!

The Little Boy could distress himself no more with weeping. Just his being in the plane and its humming were enough to make him feel groggy. He held on to the lone little hat, stroked it and put it in his pocket. No, his Little Monkey playmate wasn't lost, in the dark, fathomless deep of the world, not ever. For sure, he'd just be strolling, happening along hereafter, in the other-place, where people and things were always coming and going. The Little Boy smiled at what he'd smiled at, suddenly at one with what he felt: outside the pre-primordial chaos, like the melting apart of a nebula.

And then came the all-of-a-suddenly unforgettable something, that might have left him transfixed, and enclosed within it, a calm. It lasted next-to-nothing, like the chaff that's blown away, like something that won't normally fit inside you: a landscape, everything a frame can't contain. As if he were with his Mother, and she safe and sound, smiling, and everyone else, and the Little Monkey wearing a pretty green tie — on the porch by the clearing with the tall trees... and in the jeep lurching nicely... and everywhere ... right at the same moment... the earliest time in the day... where they were watching, in ever-ensuing time, the sun being re-born and, far more vivid, appealing and happening than ever — endlessly still — the flight of the toucan, who comes and eats berries in the golden canopy of the tree, high up in the valleys of the dawn, there close to home. Only that. Only everything.

— “*We’ve arrived at last!*” — said Uncle.

— “*Oh, no. Not yet...*” — replied the Little Boy.

He was smiling, his lips sealed: smiles and enigmas, they were his. And life was on its way.

‘Uhhh? Eh eh... Yep. Yessir. Uh huh, you wanna come in, come on... Uhhh, uhhh. D’you know I live here? How d’you know? Uhhh, uhhh... Eh. No siree, *n’t, n’t*... This the only horse you got? Phaw! That horse’s lame, knackered. Ain’t no good t’you. Huh... ’s right. Uhhh, uhhh. D’you spot this little fire of mine, from way off? Yep. Right then. In you come, you can stop here.

‘Uh huh. This ain’t my home... Yep. Wish it were. Reckon so. I ain’t no farmer, I’s a tenant... Eh, I ain’t really a tenant either. Me — all over. I jus’ here for now, when I want, I move on. Yep. Here’s where I sleep. Uhhh. Ehn? That’s up to you. No siree... You comin’ or goin’?

‘Uh huh, bring it all inside, go on. Whoopah! You unharness the horse, and I’ll help you. Shackle the horse, and I’ll help... Bring saddlebag inside, bring sack, your blankets. Uhhh, uhhh! Go ahead. You’re *sipriwara*, visitor come to see me; ain’t that so, eh? Fine. Real fine. You can sit down, you can lie down on that pallet. Pallet ain’t mine. Me — hammock. I sleep in the hammock. That’s black fella’s pallet. Now I’m gonna squat down. That’s all right too. I’ll blow on the fire. Ehn? Is that mine, eh? Yep, hammock’s mine. Uhhh. Uhhh, uhhh. Yep. No siree. Uhhh, uhhh... So, why don’t you wanna open the bag, poke around at what’s inside? Huh! You dog-in-the-manger... Huh! ... Is any of it mine? What’s it got to do with me? I won’t take your things, I ain’t gonna steal ‘em. Oh ho, oh ho, yessir, I’ll have some of that. That, I do like. You can pour some in the gourd. I sure do like it...

‘Good. Real nice. Uh huh! This rum of yours is real good. I could drink it by the litre... Aaww, hum-and-haw: just bletherin’. I’m just bletherin’ on, hummin’-and-hawin’. Feeling just fine. Hup! You’re a fine man, so rich an’ all.

Ehn? No sir. I do appreciate a drop now and then. Hardly ever. But I know how to make it: I make it from cashew fruit, from berries, maize. But no, it ain't much good. It don't have this handsome fiery taste to it. It's a lot of bother. I don't have none of it today. None at all. You wouldn't like it. It's filthy stuff, poor man's rum...

'Uh huh, black fella won't be coming back. Black fella died. How should I know? He died, somewhereabouts, died of some disease. Disease clean took him. It's true. I'm telling the truth... Uhnn... Your partner's gonna be a while, he'll only get here late tomorrow. Some more? Yessir, I'll have some. Hup! Good rum. You only bring that one flagon? Eh, eh. Your partner be up here tomorrow with the transport? That right? You got a fever? Partner sure to bring medicine... Uhnn uhnn. No sir. I drink tea made of herbs. Roots of plants. I know where to find 'em, my ma taught me, and now I know 'em all. I never get sick. Just the odd scratch or ulcer on my leg, ailments like that, the itch. Somethin' real lousy, I lie low, lone wolf, me.

'Uhnn, no point in lookin' any more... Them beasts far away by now. Partner shouldn't have let 'em go. Lousy partner, *n't, n't!* No siree. They bolted off, and there's an end to it. This big, big country: out there it's the wide, open ranges, all wild bush, *tapuitama*, injun country... Tomorrow, your partner come back, bring some more. Uhnn, uhnn, horse out in the bush. I know how to find 'em, I listen to 'em galloping. I listen, with my ear to the ground. Horse galloping, pa-ta-pa... I know how to follow their trail. Phaw... I can't now, no point, too many trails around here. They've gone way off. Wildcat be eatin' em... You sad? Ain't my fault; no way it's my fault, is it? Don't be sad. You's rich, got plenty of horses. But those ones, wildcat's eaten 'em by now, huh! Any horse gets close to the forest, be eaten up... The monkeys, they've done their screeching — so wildcat must be catching 'em...

‘Eh, some more, yessir. I likes it. First-rate rum. You got baccy too? Yep, baccy for chewing, for smoking. You got more, got plenty? Ah ha. It’s good snout. Real nice baccy, strong baccy. Yessir, for sure. You wanna give it me, I’ll have it. Real fond of it. Real fine smokes. This chico-silva baccy? Everythin’s real fine today, don’t ya think?

‘You want somethin’ to eat? There’s meat, cassava. Oh, yeah, meat and cassava mush. Plenty of pepper. Salt, I don’t have any. Run out. It’s meat, smells real good, tasty. That’s anteater I caught. You not eatin’? Anteater’s good. There’s flour, muscovado. You can eat it all up. Tomorrow I’ll catch some more, kill a deer. No, I won’t kill no deer tomorrow: no need. Wildcat’s caught your horse by now, bled him from his jugular... Big critter’s dead as a doornail, but she don’t let him go, she’s right a-top of him... She’s split open the horse’s head, torn out his throat... Split it open? Damn right!... She’s sucked out all his blood, eaten a hunk of meat. Later, she’ll have dragged that dead horse away, pulled him to the edge of the forest, dragged him in her mouth. Covered him over with leaves. Now she’s sleepin’, in the thick of the forest... Spotted jaguar starts by eatin’ the rump, then the haunches. *Suassurana* deer-cat starts with the thigh, then the breast. With the tapir, they both of them start with the belly: got a thick skin... Would you believe it? But *suassurana* don’t kill tapir, she ain’t able. *Pinima*, mean and deadly, she’s a killer; *pinima*’s my kinsfolk!...

‘Ehn? Early tomorrow morning she’ll be back, eat a bit more. Then she’ll go and drink some water. I’ll get there, along with the vultures... Stinking critters, them vultures, a whole bunch of them live over in Coffe’s Crag... I’ll get there, cut off a piece of meat for myself. Now I know what’s what: wildcat does some hunting for me, when she can. Wildcat’s my kinsfolk. They’re my kinsfolk, my kinsfolk,



hee, hee, hee... I ain't laughing at you. I'm just hummin'-and-hawin' to myself, s'all. Horse's flesh won't be rotten tomorrow. Horse meat's real good, first-rate. I don't eat rotten meat, huh! Wildcat don't either. When it's the *suassurana* who's done the killin', I don't like it so much: she covers it all over with sand, gets it dirty with earth, too...

'There ain't any coffee. Uhhh, black fella drank coffee, he liked it. I don't wanna live no more with any black fella, not ever... Big ape. Black fella stinks... But black fella he say I stink too: different kind of stink, strong. Ehn? No, the shack ain't mine; shack don't have no owner. Didn't belong to the black fella either. Palm thatch got all old and rotten, but rain don't get in, just a little drip. Aww, when I move out of here, I'm gonna set the shack alight; so's no-one can live here any more. Ain't no-one gonna live on top of my smell...

'You can eat, that mush ain't made with anteater meat. Mush made with good meat, armadillo. I killed that armadillo myself. Didn't take it from any wildcat. They don't save small critters like that: they eat them all up, every bit. Plenty of pepper, huh... Ehn? Uh huh, yep, it's dark. Moon ain't come out yet. Moon's bidin' her time, but she'll soon be up. Uhhh, there ain't none. There's no lamp, no light. I'll blow on the fire. Won't do no harm, shack won't catch fire, I'm looking out, look-a-looking. A little fire under your hammock, that's real nice, lights the place up, warms it up a bit. There's some twigs here, brush, good firewood. I don't need it for myself, I can manage in the dark. I can see in the forests. Eh, there's somethin' glowing out there in the bush: take a look, it's not an eye — it's the moonshine drippin', a drop of water, sap oozin' from the tree, a stick-insect, a big spider... You scared? You can't be a wildcat, then... You can't have any understandin' of a wildcat. Can

you? Speak up! I can stand the heat, I can take the cold. Black fella, he moaned when it was cold. Black fella a worker, he worked plenty, he liked it. Went and fetched the firewood, cooked the meals. Grew cassava. When there's no more cassava, I'm out of here. Eh, this rum's real fine!

'Ehn, ehn? I've caught plenty of wildcat. I'm a big hunter of wildcat. I came here to hunt wildcat, and for no other reason. Mas'r Johnny Guede brought me here. He paid me. I got the hides, got some money for every wildcat I killed. Money good: clink-clink... I's the only one knew how to hunt wildcat. That's why Mas'r Johnny Guede told me to stay here, to rid these parts of wildcat. Jus' me, s'all, no-one else... Aahn... I used to sell the hides, earned more money that way. I'd buy lead and powder. I'd buy salt, fuses. Eh, I'd go a long way to buy all that stuff. Muscovado too. Me — I'll go a long way. I know how to walk plenty, a real long way, walk light on my feet, I know how to step so as you don't get tired, settin' one foot straight in front of the other, I walk the whole night through. There was one time I went all the way to Boi do Urucuia... Yep. On foot. I don't want no horse, don't like 'em. I had a horse, it died, ain't around no more, got jinxed. Disease killed it. Honest truth. I'm telling the truth... I don't want a dog either. Dog makes a noise, wildcat kills it. Wildcat likes killing everything...

'Aaww! Huh! Get away! You ain't to say that I've killed wildcat, no you ain't. Me, I can. Don't you say that, oh no. I don't kill wildcat no more, I don't. It's a wicked thing I did, killing 'em. Wildcat my kinsfolk. I killed heaps of 'em. Can you count? Count four times ten, that's it: now that big pile you add four times. That many? For every one I killed, I put a little pebble in the calabash. No more pebbles gonna fit in that calabash. Now I'm gonna throw that

calabash full of pebbles in the river. I wish I hadn't killed no wildcat. If you say I killed wildcat, I'll get mad. Say I didn't, didn't kill none, okay? You said it? A' right, uh huh. Good, nice, real nice. You my friend!

'Yessir, far as I's concerned, I'll keep on drinking. Good rum, special. You drink, too: rum's yours; that old rum's a medicine... You lookin' at somethin'. Why don't you give me that watch? Oh, you can't, or won't, that's all right... Okay, forget it! I don't want no watch. Forget it. I thought you wanted to be my friend... Uhn. Uhn uhn. Yep. Uhn. Aagh phaw! I don't want no pocket knife. Don't want no money. Uhn. I'm goin' outside. You think wildcat ain't gonna come prowling round the shack, won't eat up that lame horse of yours? Oh, she'll come all right. She reaches out her huge great hand. Grass stirs all in a round, aswayin', nice and slow, nice and gentle: that's her. She creeps along through the middle. Wildcat hand — wildcat foot — wildcat tail... Creeps up all quiet, wanting to eat. You ought to be scared! Are you? If she roars, eh, my little stray critter hidin' in the bush, you'll be scared all right. She growls — she roars enough to swell up her throat and reach to the bottom of the deepest hollow... *Urrurraugh-rrurraugh*... Sounds like thunder, even. Everything shakes. A huge great mouth, big enough for a whole lot to fit in that mouth, big two-mouths! Hup! You scared? Right, I know, you ain't scared. You's buddy-buddy, fine and fancy, real brave fella. All right, so now you can give me the pocket-knife and the money, a little bit of money. I don't want the watch, that's okay, I was just kidding. What do I want a watch for? I don't need one...

'Hey, I ain't mean either. You want a wildcat hide? Uh huh, see there, uh huh. Ain't it a fine skin? They all hides I caught myself, long time ago. I stopped selling these. Didn't want to. Those ones there? Big-headed *cangussou*, he-cat,

I killed that one down by the Sorongo. Killed him, speared him with just one shot, so as not to spoil the hide. Hey, spirit-raiser! Damn bo-hunk bruiser of a he-cat. He bit the head of the spear, bit it so hard he left his teeth-marks sunk into the metal. That beast, that cat spun himself into a ball, twistin' round, nice and easy, then quick as lightning, awful like an anaconda, doublin' up his body in a raging fury under my spear. He was writhin' about, the devil, flailing those legs around, and roaring, growling something terrible, would have dragged me into the bush too, where it was all thick and thorny... Nearly had me done for!

'That one there, spotted too, but blotchy, *pinima* jaguar, big cat with a heck of a roar. I shot her dead, she was sitting up in a tree. Sittin' on one of the branches. There she was, no neck to her. Like she was asleep. What she was doing was watching me... Almost a look of scorn on her face. I didn't even wait for her to prick up her ears: there, take that, bang! — blasted her... With a shot in the mouth, so as not to spoil the hide. Uh huh, she tried to grab hold of the branch below with her claws — where she find the breath in her body for that? She was left hanging there stretched right out, then she came crashing straight down, broke two branches... Down onto the ground, with a bump, wow, yeah!

'Ehn? Black cat? There's plenty *pishuna* cats round here, plenty. I used to kill them too, just the same. Uhn, uhn, black cat breeds with spotted cat. Along they come, swimming one behind the other, their heads showing, their backbones showing. I climbed up in a tree on the river-bank, shot 'em dead. The she-cat up ahead, *pinima* jaguar, she came first. Does wild-cat swim? Eh, there's a critter can swim! Crosses the big river, straight as a die, comes ashore wherever she likes... *Suassurana* can swim too, but she don't like crossing no river. That pair of them I's telling you about, that was downstream, on another river, without

a name, dirty river... She-cat was a *pishuna*, but she weren't black like charcoal's black: she was coffee-coloured black. I stalked those two dead 'uns in the shallows: I didn't miss those hides... Right, but you don't tell nobody that I killed a wildcat, eh? You listen up and don't say a word. You're not to. Huh? Serious? Aaww! Hey, sure I like the red stuff! You know I do...

'Right, I'll have a drop. Ooff, I can drink so it makes me sweat, until my tongue's burnt to cinders... Holy injun firewater! I need the drink, so's I can get happy. I need it to loosen my tongue. If I don't drink much, then I don't talk, just get all tired... Forget it, you can leave tomorrow. I'll be left on my own, hmmm. What do I care? Eh, that's a good hide, came from the little wildcat, the one with the big head. You want that one? Take it. You'll leave the rest of the rum for me? You got a fever. You should lie down on the pallet, slip the cloak around you, cover yourself up with a hide, get some sleep. You wanna? Get your clothes off, put the watch in the armadillo shell, put the revolver in there too, no-one'll mess with them. I ain't gonna mess with your things. I'll get the fire built up, keep an eye out, tend the fire, you can sleep. Armadillo shell's only got this bit of soap inside. Ain't mine, it was that black fella's. I don't like soap. Don't you want to sleep? All right, all right, I didn't say anything, I didn't...

'You wanna know about wildcat? Eh, yeah, they in such a rage when they die, sayin' things we folks don't... In just one day I caught three. Yeah, that one was a *suassurana*, foxy-red, big wildcat same colour all over. She was sleeping by day, hid in the tall grass. Yeah, *suassurana*'s real hard to catch: she runs fast, climbs up into the trees. Wanders about some, but she lives in the bush out on the high plains. *Pinima* won't let *suassurana* live close to the swamps, *pinima* chases *suassurana* off... I've eaten her meat. Good,

tastier, more tender. I cooked it with a mush of bitter okra. Plenty of salt, hot pepper. From the *pinima* I'd only eat their hearts, *mishiri*, I've eaten them toasted, roasted over the fire, all kinds of ways. And I'd rub the fat all over my body. So I'd never be afraid!

'Sir? Yessir. Years and years. Got rid of them wildcat in three places. Thataways is the river Sucuriú, it flows into the Sorongo. There the bush is all virgin forest. But on this side it's the Ururáu river, then twenty leagues on it's the Monk's Mouth, you could have a ranch there now, cattle. I killed all the wildcat... Yeah, ain't no-one can live here, no-one but me. Eh, eh? Uh huh... Ain't no houses. There's houses behind the palm-trees, six leagues away, in the middle of the swamp. Mister Rauremiro, farming man, he used to live there. Farming man died, his wife too, his daughters, little boy. All died of some disease. Honest truth. I'm speaking the truth!... No-one comes this way, it's too hard. Way too far for anyone to come. Just because it's so far, a week's journey, rich hunters come out here, jaguar hunters, they come every year in the month of August, to hunt wildcat, too.

'They bring big dogs with them, wildcat hunting dogs. Each of 'em got a fine rifle, a shotgun, I'd like one of them... Uhnn, uhnn, wildcat's no fool, they run away from the dogs, climb up into the trees. Dog barks his head off, sets off on the trail again... If wildcat can find a way, it'll get into the thick of the forest, yeah, there a man can have trouble seeing whether there's any wildcat about. All barking, and chasing — the dogs after her: then she goes wild, *mopoama*, crashing through the bush, flying about this way and that, killing dogs left, right and centre, oh, she can move every which way. Uh huh... Lying in wait, that's when she's at her most dangerous: she's gotta kill or be killed once and for all... Yeah, she grunts like a pig, the dogs won't go anywhere

near her. Not one of them. Just one lash of her paw, that's enough! A hook, a swipe... She spins round and jumps aside, you can't see where she's coming from... Whoosh. Even as she's dying, she can still kill a dog, a big 'un too. She roars and growls. Tears the dog's head off. You afraid? I'll teach you, eh; you keep watching over there, where there's no wind blowing — then you stay on your guard, 'cause that's where wildcat could leap out at you from, all of a sudden... She'll jump sideways, and turn in mid-air. Jump crosswise. You should learn how. She jumps, but don't. She pricks up her ears, a rattling, a crackling, like hailstones. She cuts along. You ever seen a snake? Well, then, Hup! screech-owl screeching, deadly *jucca* tree knockin'... Time to time a little sound, dry leaves stirring as she steps over the twigs, eh, eh — little bird flies away. Capybara squeals, you hear it in the distance: *aooh!* — and jumps in the water, wildcat's close by now. When *pinima*'s ready to jump up and eat you, her tail curls round with the end up in the air, then she pulls herself together, nice and steady. Taut as a bow: her head out in front, up in the air, and when she opens up her mouth, the spots stretch out, her eyes get pushed apart, her whole face pinned back. Hey: her mouth — hey: her whiskers twitching... Her tongue all folded back on itself out one side... She parts her front legs, wrigglin' now all ready to jump: she hangs back on her hind — eh, eh — on her hind legs... Wildcat that's cornered gets the devil in her, sits there on the ground breaking up, smashing up sticks of wood. She gets up, stands up. You go anywhere near her now, you be torn apart. Yeah, gettin' hit by a wildcat's fist is worse than a clubbing... You see her shadow? Then you already dead... Hee, hee, hee... Ha ha-ha-ha ... Don't be scared, I'm here.

'Right then, I'll keep on drinking, if it's all the same to you. Now I'm feeling more cheerful! I'm not one to be a

skinflint neither, food and liquor's for using up right away, while you fancy it... Nothing like a full belly. Rum real good, I was missing that. Yeah, firewood lousy, your eyes watering with all that smoke... Eh? Yep, if you say so. Ain't sad to me. Ain't pretty, either. Right, it's just the way it is, like any place. Good hunting, ponds to go swimming in. Ain't no place pretty or ugly, ain't meant to be. Places are for living in, I was paid to come here and kill wildcat. I don't any more, not ever. I kill capybara, otter, and sell the skins. Yessir, I like people, I do. There's times I'll walk a long, long way to see someone. I'm a runner, like a field deer...

'There was a married woman, at the foot of the highlands, head of the stream called Winding Path of the Shounshoun. Trail goes by there, trail to a ranch. Real fine woman, she was called Maria Quirineia. Her husband was crazy, old Siruveio, spent the whole time shackled up with a heavy chain. Husband just talked nonsense, on nights when the moon weren't clear he'd shout gibberish, calling out, talking injun... They didn't die. Didn't neither of 'em get ill and die. My oh my...

'Lovely drop of rum! I like to swill it around first, before I swallow it. Uhnn, uhnn. Uhhhh... Here, whatever comes along, it's just me and the wildcat. The rest is food for us. Wildcat, they know a lot, too. There's things she sees, that we don't, and can't. Oof! so many things... I don't like to know too much, my head starts hurtin'. I just know what wildcat knows. But about that, I know everything. I learnt it. When I first came here, I's left on my own. Bein' on your own, that's real bad, nothin' but torment. Mas'r Johnny Guede a real bad man, brought us here and left us all alone. Huh! Missed my ma, she died, *sassyara*. Aaahn... Jus' me... — all alone... Didn't have no help or protection...

'Then I started learning. I know how to do everything



just like a wildcat. Wildcat's power is that she's not in a hurry: that's a creature lies down on the ground, she'll use the sound bottom of some hole or other, she'll use the grass, look for their hiding-places behind every tree, slide along the ground, softly-softly, in and out, ever so quiet, shee-shoo, shee-shoo, until she gets right up to the prey she wants to catch. She stops, and stares and stares, ain't nothing going to make her get weary of staring, yeah, she's sizing up the jump. Eeyah, eeyah ... She lunges once, sometimes twice. If she misses, then she goes hungry, but worse 'n that is that she nearly dies of the shame... So then, she's about to jump: she stares so hard, does it to scare you, she ain't going to take pity on nobody... A shudder goes right down her body, she shuffles her feet into position, coils herself up like a spring, and takes one mighty leap! — it's beautiful to watch...

'Aw, when she's on top of the deer, poor critter, going for the kill, there's every curve rippling and bulging on her body, and she and her spots look shinier, her legs are helping too, eh, her plump legs bent double like a frog's, and her tail tucked under; anything that might come her way, she looks set to rip it apart, her neck stretched out... Hup! She just goes on killing, eating, on and on... Deer flesh makes a cracking sound. Wildcat roars out loud, like a fanfare, with her tail upright and mean, then, claws out, hey, strong claws, she roars once more, and that's enough. An orgy of eating and drinking. If it's a rabbit, some small critter like that, she'll eat it right down to the joints; swallow everything, gobble it all up, so she hardly leaves even the bones. The guts and innards, she don't like to eat...

'Wildcat's a beautiful thing! You ever seen one? When there's a little stirrin' in the bamboo thicket, just a tremblin' for no reason: then that's one, eh, that could be one... Have you seen then how — how along she comes, with her belly

full? Uh huh! How she walks with her head down, slowly saunterin' along: keeps her back straight as a rod, like a mountain ridge, raises one shoulder, then the other, each of her thighs, each of her haunches nice and rounded... The handsomest she-cat is Maria-Maria... Hey, you want to hear about her? No, I ain't gonna tell you. I won't, no way... You want to know an awful lot of things!

'They left me here all alone, jus' me. Left me to work at killing, hunting cats. They shouldn't have. Mas'r Johnny Guede shouldn't have. Didn't they know I was their kinsfolk? Oh oh! Oh oh! I'm bringin' down evil and misfortune, 'cause I killed so many wildcat, why did I do that? I can cuss, I can. I can cuss! *Sheess, n't, n't!*... When I've got a full belly I don't like to see folks, don't like rememberin' anyone: I get mad. It's like I got to talk to the memory of 'em. I won't. I keep good and quiet. To begin with, I used to like folks. Now I jus' like wildcat. Love the smell of their breath... Maria-Maria — pretty she-cat, *cangussou*, fine-and-pretty.

'She's young. Look, look — she's just eaten, she coughs, twitches her whiskers, eh, tough, white whiskers hanging down, tickling my face, lovely the way she tickles you. She goes off for a drink of water. Ain't nothing finer than Maria-Maria she-cat sprawled on the ground, drinking water. When I call, she comes. You wanna see? You shaking, I know you are. Don't be afraid, she's not coming, she'll only come if I call. If I don't call, she won't come. She's afraid of me too, just like you...

'Hey, these wide open ranges, goin' on and on, that's my country, hey, this here — all mine. My ma would've liked it here. . . I want 'em all to be scared of me. Not you, you're my friend... I ain't got no other friend. Do I? Uhhh. Uhhh, uhhh... Ehn? Hereabouts there were just three men, plainsmen, once, on the edge of the highlands. They were

escaped criminals, fujees, came to hide out up here. Ehn? What were they called? Why you need to know that? Were they relatives of yours? Huh! Plainsman, one of them was called Gugué, he was a bit fat; another one was called Antunias — he had some money stashed away! The other one was old Rioporo, angry man, cruel man: I didn't like him a bit...

'What did they used to do? Uh huh... Fujees fish, hunt, grow cassava; sell hides, buy powder, lead, fuses, all that gear... Eh, they keep to the highlands, the plains. Land there's no good. Further away, over in Black Dog, there's plenty of fujees — you can go take a look. Those ones milk the mangaba trees. Poor folks! Don't even have clothes to wear any more ... Eh, some go about with nothing on at all. Aaww... Me, I got clothes, my rags, my pan.

'Ehn? The three plainsmen? No, they didn't know about hunting wildcat, they were too afraid. Couldn't hunt wildcat with a spear, like I do. We used to trade baccy for salt, we'd chat with them, lend them a bit of muscovado. They died, all three, died, every one of 'em — so much for them tough fellas. They got sick and died, yeah, yeah. Honest truth. I'm talking the truth, don't make me mad!

'With my spear? No, I don't kill wildcat no more. Didn't I say? Ah, but I know how. If I want to, I can kill all right! How do I do it? I wait. Wildcat comes. Yeeeah! She comes pad-padding gently along, you won't make her out with those eyes of yours. Eh, she growls but don't jump. She just comes stretching one leg out after the other, crawling close to the ground. No, she never jumps. Eh — she comes right up to me, and I raise the spear to her. Whoah! I raise the blade of the spear to her, point the tip right where her chest is. You touch her with anything, she'll lie down on the ground. Keeps trying to swipe or grab out, trying to clutch everything in a hug. Sometimes she'll get up on her

haunches. Wildcat, she'll pull the tip of the spear towards her. Eh, then I stick it in... Right away she gasps. Red blood pours out, or more like black... Chriisst, poor wildcat, poor devil, that spear-stick going right into her... Poor darlin'... Be stabbed to death? Uhhh, uhhh, God forbid... Feel the iron pushing into your living flesh... Huh! You afraid? 'Cause I ain't. I don't feel pain...

'Ha, ha, don't you go thinking it's nice and easy, quiet and gentle, oh no. Eh, yeeah... Wildcat's choked up with rage. She slithers, and writhes, and struggles under that spear. Wildcats are wildcats — like snakes... She twists about all over the place, you think there's a whole bunch of 'em, that she's turned into lots more. Eh, she'll lash out with her tail, too. She coils up, rolls into a ball, somersaults, eh, bends herself double, twists backwards, backs away... You not used to it, you don't even see, you can't, she slips away from you... You can't imagine the strength of her! She opens her mouth right up, makes an awful hawking sound, she's hoarse, she's hoarse. It's crazy how quick she is. She'll drag you down. Ah, ah, ah... Then sometimes she'll run off, escape, disappear into the bamboo, the devil. On her last legs now, and still she keeps on and on killing... She can kill quicker than anything. That dog drops his guard, wildcat hand grabs him from behind, tears open his coat... Hup! Fine, handsome. I'm a wildcat... Me — wildcat!

'You reckon I look like a wildcat? But there's times when I look more like one. You ain't seen. You got one of them things — a mirror, is it? I'd like to see my face... *Sheess, n'y, n't...* I got a strong stare. Yeah, you got to know how to look at wildcat, straight in the eyes, look at her with courage in your eyes: huh, she respects that. If you look at her with fear in your eyes, she knows, then you're dead for sure. Can't be afraid at all. Wildcat knows who you are, knows what you're feeling. I'll teach you, you can learn.

Uhhh. She hears everything, sees every movement. No, wildcat don't go after the scent. She don't have a good sense of smell, she ain't a dog. She hunts with her ears. A cow breathes in its sleep, or snaps a blade of grass: wildcat knows about it half a league away... No sir. Wildcat don't lie in wait at the top of a tree. Only *suassurana* walks from tree to tree, catching monkeys. *Suassurana* jumps straight up into the tree; spotted cat climbs up, just like a house-cat. You ever seen it? Yeah, yeah, I climb up in the trees and lie in wait. Sure do. It's better keeping watch from up there. No-one can see I'm watching... Slide along the ground, to get close up to the prey, I learned that best of all with the wildcat. So darn slow, you don't even realise you're moving yourself... You got to learn all the movements your prey makes. I know how you move your hand, whether you looking up or down, I know how long it takes for you to decide to jump, if I need to. I know which leg you raise first...

'You want to go outside? Go ahead. Watch how the moon's come up: in that full light, they'll be hunting, on a moonlit night. When there's no moon, they don't hunt; only in the evening, at dusk, and round about dawn... In the daytime they all stay sleeping, in the bamboo groves, close to the swamp, or in the deep dark of the forest, in the caroa thickets, right in the bush... No sir, round this time wildcat don't do any yowling. They'll be hunting without making a sound. A whole lot of days can go by without you hearing a single yowl... What just made that noise then was a crested seriema... Uhhh, uhhh. Come on in. Sit down on the pallet. You want to lie in the hammock? Hammock's mine, but I'll let you. I'll roast some cassava for you. All rightee. I'll have another little drop then. You let me, and I'll drink it right down to the dregs. *N't, m'p*, aah...

'Where I learn all this? I learned it a long way from

these parts, there's other men over there, almost as fearless as me. They taught me to use a spear. Valenteen Maria and Joss Maria — two brothers. A spear just like this one, with a handle a yard and a half long, nice cross-piece, and a fine aim. There was Mas'r Inácio too, old Johnny Inácio: he was a black man, but a real fine black man, straight as an injun arrow. Mas'r Inácio was a master spearsman, the man would go out unarmed except for a spear, a really old spear, and play with the wildcat. His brother, King Inácio, he's got a blunderbuss...

'Ehn? Uh huh. That's 'cause wildcat didn't tell each other, didn't know I came so as to get rid of them all. They didn't doubt me for a second, they got my scent, knew I was one of their kinsfolk... Yeah, wildcat's *jaguareteh*, my uncle, they all are. They wouldn't run away from me, so I killed 'em... They only realised later, when it came to it, and then they went crazy... Yeah, I swear: I didn't kill any more after that! I don't. I can't, it's wrong. I got punished: hoodooed, jinxed... I hate to think about those killings I did... My kinsfolk, how could I?! Aw, aw, aw, my kinsfolk... I gotta cry, otherwise they'll get mad.

'Yessir, I been caught by some of them. They've taken a bite out of me, look here. It weren't here in the open ranges. It happened down at the river over yonder, somewhere else. My other partners missed their aim, got scared. Yeah, broad-spotted *pinima* ran into the middle of us all, rolled over and over with us on the ground. She went crazy. Ripped off the front of one guy's chest, tore out his lung, we could see his heart in there, still in him, beatin' away in the middle of all that mess of blood. She stripped the skin clean off the face of another man — Antonio Fonseca. She scratched this cross on my forehead, tore open my leg, the claw went in real deep, ripped it to shreds, *mussuruca*, left a festering wound. Claw's poisonous, ain't

a clean sharp edge, that's why it hurts you bad, makes a nasty mess. Teeth too. Ghrahh! Bah, bah, yeah, a swipe from a wildcat can knock the spear out of the spearsman's hand... They stabbed her more'n thirty or forty times! Uhn, if you'd been there, you'd be dead by now... She killed near on five men. Took all the flesh off the spearsman's arm, down to the bone, with the big nerve and the vein sticking out... I was hiding behind the palm-tree, with my knife in my hand. *Pinima* saw me, hugged me between her front legs, I ended up underneath her, all tangled up together. Uhn, it's hard to get a grip on her hide, it's slippery like soap, okra slime, she writhes around from left to right, just like a snake, yeah, a snake... She would have ripped me to shreds, but she was tired by now, she'd shed a lot of blood. I grabbed hold of the critter's mouth, so she couldn't bite any more. She scratched my chest, I've no nipple left on this side. She went at me with three hands! Tore open my arm, my back, she died clinging to me, from the stabbings I'd given her, lost all her blood... *Manyuassah*, mean devil of a wildcat! She'd drooled all over my head, my hair ended up reeking of that stink for days and days.

'Uhn, uhn. Yessir. They know I'm one of their own. The first of them I saw and didn't kill was Maria-Maria. I went to sleep in the bush, right near here, next to a little fire I'd made. In the early hours I was asleep, and she came to me. Woke me up, she was smelling me. I saw those pretty eyes of hers, yellow eyes with little black speckles afloat in that glowing light... Then I pretended I was dead, that's all I could do. She sniffed me, sniff-sniffing, paw in the air, I thought she was trying to find my neck. An urukwera cried out, a toad croak-croaked, the creatures in the forest, and me just listening, listening on and on... I didn't budge. It was a soft, pleasing sort of place, lying there in the rosemary. The fire had gone out, but the embers were still giving out

some heat. She came and rubbed herself up against me, staring at me. Her eyes were bunched up together, and they were flashing — glint, glint: the look in those eyes was keen, sharp, like it wanted to pierce right into you, swallow you right up: and never leave you be. For a long time she didn't do anything either. Then she laid her great big hand on top of my chest, real dainty. I thought — now I'm a dead man: 'cause she could see that's where my heart was. But she was only treading lightly, with one foot, and feeling, fishing about with the other, trying to wake me up. Yeah, yeah, now I began to get it... That was some wildcat, and I knew it was me she liked... I opened my eyes and looked straight at her. I said softly: — “Hey, Maria-Maria... You ought to be smarter, Maria-Maria...” Yeah, she growled like she was pleased, and rubbed herself up against me again, miaow, yowl. Yeah, she started talking to me, jagajawing, jagajawjaw... Her tail was stiff now, wagging, *sasseh-sassemo*, wildcat's tail hardly ever keeps still: huh, huh. Then off she went, and crouched down to watch me from a little further off. I didn't move but stayed where I was, lying on my back, and kept on talking to her and staring at her face to face all the while, giving her nothing but the best advice. When I stopped talking, she'd let out a chirruping mew — jagajawjaw... She had a full belly, she was licking her paws, licking her throat. Speckles on her forehead, dew like beads of moonshine around her nostrils... Then she lay down leaning up against me, her tail giving me friendly slaps on the face... She fell asleep right by me. Her eyes turn to slits when she's sleeping. Sleeping, then sleeping some more, with her face in her hand, her snout and nose tucked into a hand... I could see her milk was drying up, I could see her shrivelled up teats. Her cubs must have died, who knows what from. But now, she ain't going to have any cubs ever again, oh no! — no she ain't...



‘Ehn? Afterwards? Afterwards, why, she slept. Snored with her faced turned to one side, showing that awful set of teeth, and her ears pinned back. That was on account of a *suassurana* that was heading this way. A light-brown, corn-coloured *suassurana*. *Suassurana* stopped short. She’s the worst, an evil, bloodthirsty critter. I saw those great green eyes of hers, gleaming too, so round they looked like they were about to pop out. Uhnn, uhnn, Maria-Maria snored, *suassurana* went, went on its way.

‘Hey, *catou*, fine ‘n’ handsome, *poran-poranga*, ain’t none finer! Maria-Maria sat up all of a sudden, and pricked her ears forward. Yeah, off she slowly went, goin’ about her business, to look at her you’d think she’s lumbering along, but if she wants to she’ll move quickly, nimbly, just as she needs to. She sways so sweet, a lovely, lazy lilting, fur flowing, paws padding... She stands up full-length at the peroba tree, digs in her claws, and scratches all the way down, sharpening them to a point, clawing that big peroba tree. Then she goes off to the white boxwood tree. Leaves a mark there, you can see where she’s been doing it.

‘I could have killed her then, if I’d wanted to. But I didn’t. Why’d I want to kill Maria-Maria? Anyways, in those days I was sad, real sad, here on my own, jus’ me, and even sadder and jinxed ‘cause I’d killed some wildcat, bewitched I was. From that day on I didn’t kill any more, just the last one I killed was that *suassurana* I went after. But *suassurana* ain’t no kinsfolk of mine, my kinsfolk is the black and the spotted wildcat... I killed that one as the sun came up. *Suassurana* had just eaten a red brocket fawn. I killed it but out of anger, on account of that place where I was sleeping bein’ where she came and left her dirt, that’s what I found in amongst the bamboo, nothin’ but her mess. Yeah, they cover it up with earth, but the he-cat covers it up less, he-cat’s more dirty that way...

‘Uh huh. Maria-Maria sure is pretty, you should see her!

Prettier than any woman. She smells of garlic-wood blossom after the rain. She ain't so big. She's a *cangussou*, big-headed jaguar, apart from her spots she's a pale, pale yellow. During the drought they turn even paler. Shiny skin that's soft, real soft. The spots, well none of them is a really black shade of black: more dark crimson, like a purplish red. Aren't any like that? There's all kinds. You ever compared her spots and her rings? You count, and you'll see: they vary so much, you won't find two just the same... Maria-Maria's got a whole bunch of little spots. A tiny, pretty face all made up, all freckled, just like that. A little spot in each corner of her mouth, and others behind her little ears... Inside her ears it's snowy white, like cotton-wool. Belly too. Belly and underneath her throat, and in between her legs. I'm allowed to tickle her there for hours on end, she's real fond of that... She licks my hand, licks it in a lovin' sort of way, the way they do to clean the muck off their cubs; otherwise, no-one could stand the rasping of that rough, scratchy tongue, it's got a worse rasp than a *sambaíba* leaf; but then, how is it she goes on licking, and don't scratch her little cub with her tongue?

'Ehnn? Her, Maria-Maria, have a he-cat? No, she don't have a mate. Phaw! Bah! Get away! If any he-cat comes her way, I'll kill him, I will, I'll kill him, whether he's my kinsfolk or whoever!

'All rightee, but now you need to sleep. Me too. Hey: real late. *Sejussou* is high in the sky, look at his little stars... I ain't gonna sleep, it's almost time for me to take a wander out there, every day I get up early, long before daybreak. You sleep. Why don't you lie down? — you just gonna stay awake asking me things, then I answer, then you ask me something else again? What's the point of that? That way, yeah, I'll finish up all your rum. Uhnn, uhnn, I won't get drunk. I only get drunk when I drink a lot, I mean a lot,

of blood... You can sleep tight, I'll look after things, I can keep an eye on everything. I can see you're sleepy. Hey, if I want I can scratch two circles on the floor — to be your eyes — then I'll step on them, and you'll go right off to sleep... Eh, but you're brave enough, too, to look a man straight in the face. You got a good strong stare. You could even hunt wildcat... Stay calm now. You my friend.

'Ehn? No sir, I don't know nothin' about that. All I know about is wildcat. Not cattle. Cattle is for eatin'. Cows, bulls, steers. My pa did. My pa weren't no injun breed, my pa was a white man, white like you, my pa Chico Pedro, *mimbawamanyanassara*, a cowhand he was, mean and tough. Died in Tungo-Tungo, in the Goiás ranges, Wild Falls ranch. Got killed. Don't know any more'n that. Everyone's pa. The man was stupid.

'Sir? Uh huh, yessir. She might be hereabouts, might be prowling around the shack. They're all around, each wildcat lives on its own, near on the whole year. You don't get pairs living together the whole time, just a month, a short while. *Jaguaririca*, big bush-cat, they's the only ones who live in pairs. Ouff, there's plenty of them, a whole bunch of 'em. Yeah, around these parts I don't do any more killing: this is *jaguaretama*, wildcat country, crawling with 'em... I know 'em all, nothing I don't know about 'em. No more of 'em can come this way — them that live around here won't allow it, otherwise they'll finish up all the game. These days I don't do any more killing, now they've all got names. Did I name 'em? Huh! No, I didn't, not just like that, I knew those were their names. Huh... How are you gonna know if they weren't? Why you asking? You gonna buy a wildcat? You gonna have a talk with one of 'em? Poor critter... Huh... I know, you want to know, just so you can be even more scared of 'em, don't ya?

'Huh, a' right. Here: in a hollow over that side, real

close to here, there's wildcat Mopoca, *cangussou* she-cat. She's just given birth, got a new cub, *jaguaráin*. Mopoca, good wildcat mother, she was always movin' about with her young, carrying cubs in her mouth. Now she's settled down in a good place, over there. Never goes far, don't get enough to eat. Hardly ever comes out. She just comes out to drink some water. Since she gave birth she's skinny, always thirsty, the whole time. Her cub, *jaguaráin*, wildcat pup, kitten, there's two of them, little furry mites, they're like stick insects, can't hardly move properly. Mopoca's got plenty of milk, cubs suckling the whole time...

'Sir? Eh, any others? Here: further on, in the same direction, 'bout five leagues, you find the worst wildcat of them all, Maramonyangara, she's the boss, fights with the others, stares 'em out. On the other side, at the edge of the swamp, there's Sledgehammer, broad-spotted, huge, you just have to see her massive great hands, her claws, flattened out hands... Further on there's Tatacica, black as black can be, *pishuna* jaguar; she's got long legs, she's real wild. That one catches a lot of fish... Ehn, another black one? Uinyua, she lives in a real fine lair, a hollowed out hole in the gully, under the roots of a banyan-tree... There's Slasher, a crafty old broad-spotted *pinima*: she goes off and hunts up to twenty leagues away, she goes all over. Slasher lives in a cave — wildcat's real fond of caves, likes 'em a lot... Mpu, and Missy, they were chased off, a long way from here, the others chased them off, 'cause the food was running out... Yeah, they move their homes about a lot on account of that... I ain't heard any more about 'em, they're not around here no more. The real wild *cangussou* is Tibitaba — wildcat with eyebrows: you watch her, she stays over there, lies at the top of the gully, right at the edge, her hands kind of dangling, just like that... There used to be others, gone now: Coema-Piranga, deep red, she died choking on a bone,

darn critter... Jinxy, an old, old wildcat, with sticking out ribs, she was always going hungry, dogged by hunger, in the forest... Ehn? Uhhh, uhhh, no I ain't gonna say where Maria-Maria lives. How I supposed to know you don't want to kill her?! Of course I ain't...

'Uh huh. What about the he-cats? Plenty, ooff, heaps of them. Just take a look at Man-eater: broad-spotted bruiser of a tom-cat, you be scared just by the size of him... All those fangs on top like butcher's knives, stained yellow, eh, smoker's teeth! There's one, Pushuera, he's old too: his big back molars, for cutting hunks of meat, they're worn out, ground down. Suú-Suú is a *pishuna* jaguar, real black, he's got one hell of a scary roar, you hear that and you'll be shaking, shaking, shaking... He likes Mopoca she-cat. Apiponga ain't a *pishuna*, he's the handsomest spotted he-cat, you won't see another like him, with his big nose. And he's always well fed, he's the best of 'em all at hunting. There's a *cangussou* he-cat, Petessara, who's a mite crazy, wrong in the head, it's him who just wanders about by day, he's the one I reckon looks like a twisty-mouth croaker fish... There's Uitawera for one, and Uatawera for another, they're brothers, yeah, but it's me who knows that, not them...

'A' right, that'll do for now. I'll stop nattering. Otherwise, sun'll be up, you won't have slept, your partner be coming with the horses, you won't be able to travel, be sick, be tired. You sleep now. You want to? You want me to go, so's you can sleep here on your own? I can go. You don't? Well I ain't natterin' no more. I'll keep quiet, quiet. This place is mine. Uhhh. Uhhh uhhh. Why you ask questions, ask questions instead of going to sleep? I dunno. *Suassurana* don't have a name. *Suassurana* not my kinsfolk, she's a yellowbelly. It's only the black-backed one is fierce. *Suassurana* laughs with her cubs. Yeah, she's red, but her

cubs are spotted... Uhn, I'll stop chatterin' now, stop nattering, stop fanning the flames. Leave be! You goin' to sleep, or what? Uhn. Yeah. Uhn uhnn. No sir. Uhn... Uhn uhnn... Uhn...

'Ehn? Partner gonna bring another flagon? You'll give it to me? Uh huh... Huuuh... Hup! You want to hear some more? I'll tell you. You real fine guy, you my friend. When do they mate? Phaw, is that mating? Disgustin'... You come here at the end of the cold season, when the boxwood tree's in bloom, and you'll see. They get all moonstruck. They rage, and roar and roar, yowling and growling the whole time, they hardly hunt any more for food, they get skinny, go off out into the forest, off their heads, they piss everywhere, at night it stinks to high heaven... She-cat on heat yowls more, makes a different, funny sounding yowl. Along she comes with the fur on her back up on end, rubbing herself up against the trees, she lies down on the ground, with her belly in the air, *aruey!* All you hear is *arraugh-arraugh... arrarraaughhh...* You don't hang about: if you do, you be eaten up in no time, for sure...

'He-cat follows her, for league after league. There two after her? Three? Hey, you don't want to see 'em fighting... Fur starts flyin'. Then, later, one's left on his own with the she-cat. That's when things really get goin'. They shoot off after each other. Start howlin', they take to howlin' and yowlin' over and over, the whole night long, they roll around on the ground and start fighting. Grass gets trampled, bamboo torn down, bushes flattened on the ground, they tear out clumps of plants and break up branches. He-cat gets demented, his body goes stiff, he opens his throat up wide, *aaww*, bares his fangs. Hey: tail like a rod, beatin' hard on the ground. You better run, get away. You hear me? Me — I'll be off on their trail. One huge paw-print after the other, no claw-marks... I'm off. One day I'll be

gone for good.

‘Oh no, he and she-cat don’t go hunting together. Each one for himself. But they keep each other company the whole day long, lying down, sleeping. Heads resting against each other. One turned one way, the other the other way... Here: I’m gonna bring Maria-Maria wildcat here, I ain’t lettin’ any he-cat be with her. If I call her she’ll come. You wanna see? You won’t shoot at her with that revolver of yours, will you? Hey, maybe that revolver of yours is jinxed, huh? Let me take a look. If it’s jinxed, I’ll fix it... Oh, don’t you want me to? Won’t you let me touch your revolver? That’s three times you’ve closed your eyes, you’ve yawned too, you’ve yawned. If I keep on with these stories, I guess you’re gonna fall asleep, eh?

‘Yeah, when they’re raisin’ their young I’ll find the lair. Den’s well hidden, even harder to find in the forest, a hollow in a cave. In the thickest jungle. Mom-cat gets the devil in her. When I first started killin’ wildcat, I’d wait for six months, so as the cubs wouldn’t be left to starve. I’d kill the mother, let the cub grow. Ehn? No, I weren’t sorry for them, it was just so I wouldn’t waste any of my earnings, or the money for the hide... Yeah, I can yowl just like a cub, she-cat comes running, she’s desperate. There was a she-cat with her whole litter, a *pishuna* jaguar, real big, real pretty, real ugly. I yowled and yowled, jagameeow, jagameeoweeow... She came running, crazy she was, scoldin’ the cub under her breath, she didn’t know which way to turn. I yowled here from inside the shack, *pishuna* mom-cat came right up, callin’ to me to go back to the den. She opened up her fist to me... I wouldn’t kill her, though, didn’t want to lose the cubs, to waste ‘em. I stopped yowling, and fired the gun off in the air. *Pishuna* ran off again swift as lightning, moved her home, took her young half a league away, got herself another lair, in the forest

where the swamps are. Her cubs weren't *pishunas*, they were spotted wildcat cubs, *pinima*... She grabs hold of each cub tight by the scruff of the neck and carries them along, jumping over gullies and bushes... Hey, dumb critter! But you can't say she's dumb, eh. Just me.

'Yessir. I'm drinking your rum right up. Yeah, nice fiery taste, warms your body up too. I'm feelin' happy, yes I am... Ehn? I dunno, I like going about with no clothes on, just an old pair of pants with a belt around my waist. This here skin of mine's tough as leather. Uh huh, but I got some clothes put away, good clothes, a shirt, a fine hat. One day I'll put 'em on, I want to go to a party, lots of parties. I won't wear no boots, though: don't like 'em! Don't like anything on my feet, phaw, won't fall into that trap. Hah. No partyin' around here. Ehn? Church, no, no way! I do want to go to heaven. No priests or missionaries, I ain't fond of them, don't want anything to do with 'em. I got a little locket to hang around my neck, I like saints. Have I got one? Saint Benedict keeps the snakes away... But snakebite can't hurt me — I've got some deer's horn, I put it on and it heals up. No departed souls, *tagoaíba*, spooks, out here on the ranges there ain't any, I ain't seen any. There's the devil, but I ain't seen him either. Uhhh uhnn...

'Ehn? Me? It's you who's askin'. But I know why you're askin'. Uhhh. Uh huh, on account of my hair bein' this way, eyes real small... Yep. Not my pa. He was white, weren't no Indian fella. Ah right, my ma she was, she real good. Not Craoh Indian. Pewa, my ma, Tacunapewa heathen, long way's away. Not Craoh: Craoh real scared, they was nearly all scared of wildcat. My ma was called Mar'Yara Maria, she's a breed. Afterwards it was I lived with Craoh, lived with 'em. Ma good, pretty, she fed me, fed me real good, plenty, heaps... I've been around a lot, I've travelled. Craoh use pike, only a Craoh knows how to



kill wildcat with a pike. Whuh?! Joerkim Pereira Shapudo, his other name was Kim Crenye, that one weren't afraid of anythin'. My friend! Bow, arrow, arrow go far. Ehn? Oh, I got a whole bunch of names. Name my ma gave me: Bacuriquirepa, Bacuri, injun mauled. Breoh, Beroh, too. My pa took me away to the missionary. Baptised me, baptised me. With name of Tonico; fine name, don't you think? Short for Antonyo de Yesus... Later they called me Macuncozo, that was the name of a farmstead that used to belong to some other fella, yeah — a farmstead they call Macuncozo... Now I don't have no name, don't need one. Mas'r Johnny Guede used to call me Tonyo Tiger-catcher. Mas'r Johnny Guede brought me here, jus' me, all on my own. He didn't oughta! Now I ain't got a name any more...

'Naah, ehn, that's not a wildcat making that noise. It's a tapir, teaching its young to swim. Lots of tapir around here. Real good meat. On a warm day, tapir stays in the water to do his thinking, he knows all that's going on. Ehn? Ah, no, *pinima* wildcat eats tapir, eats 'em all. Tapir won't fight, tapir runs off. Once wildcat's jumped on her, she can't run with that wildcat on her back, no way she can, she ain't able. When *pinima* springs on a tapir, she kills it there and then. Jaguar bleeds that tapir. A clear night like this 'un, right for wildcat to go hunting!

'No siree. That's the humming of other creatures, pauraque, potoo screeching. What called out then was a hungry otter. It went: — *eeha!* Otter swims upstream. Yeah, she can come out of the water anywhere and her coat's gonna be dry... Capybara? You'll hear their racket from way off, grazing, half in, half out of the water... If a wildcat roars, I'll tell you which one it is. Eh, no, no need. If she growls or yowls, you'll know straight away... It's a strangled yowlin', from deep down in her throat, yeah, her throat's huge... Heeyah... Hup! You scared? Ain't scared? Well

you gonna be. The whole forest is scared. Wildcat's a butcher. T'morrow you gonna see, I'll show you her trail, her tracks... One day, new moon, you come here, come and see my trail, like wildcat trail, yeah, I's a wildcat! Uhhh, don't you believe me?

'Hey, crazy man... Hey, crazy man... Me — wildcat! Huh? I ain't the devil. It's you who's the devil, you twisty-mouth. You's lousy, lousy, ugly. Devil? Maybe I could be... I live in a shack with no walls... I swim, all the time, whole time. I've had the black pox. Joerkim Craoh had a cap with hawk feathers, macaw, scarlet ibis feathers too. Bands of ostrich feathers around his knee, his legs, his waist. But I'm a wildcat. Jaguar my uncle, my mother's brother, *tutira*... My kinsfolk! My kinsfolk!... Hey, gimme your hand... Gimme your hand, let me touch it... Just for a second...

'Hey, you got the revolver in your hand? Uhhh uhhh. No need to keep hold of that revolver... You scared wildcat gonna come here to the shack? Uh huh, Uinyua wildcat's crossed the marshes, I know she has, come to hunt for spotted cavy, she's slinking her way along in the thick grass. She creeps along with her belly to the ground, sprawled out, with her ears pricked forward — she clicks her ears like that, ever so slightly... Uinyua wildcat's black, devilish black, gleaming in the moonlight. She keeps flattened against the ground. Tips of the grass tickle her nose and she don't like that: she snorts. She eats fish, waterfowl, heron, coot. You can hear the *wey-wey* of the snipe flying off, snipe flies this way and that... Little bird shivers and takes off without a sound. Uinyua didn't take much notice. But the cavy got startled, took a leap. You hear the splashin'? Uinyua wildcat must be real mad. Soakin' wet from the dewy grass, spattered with the white mud from the riverbank. Along she comes... she's the chief, the boss.

Along she comes... In a boilin' rage! Your horse there making such a racket, all scared. Hey, no need for all that, Uinyua's stopped short. She comin'? No, she ain't, it was some frog or other croakin', *tataca*... Don't be afraid, if she comes I'll chase her off, shoo her away. I keep still, real still; she don't see me. Let the horse whinny, he must be shakin', his ears are pricked up. Those shackles okay? Strong fetters? He won't escape. Anyways, that horse of yours ain't no good any more. Wait... You point your revolver the other way, whuh!

'She's not comin' now. Today Uinyua wasn't brave enough. S'all right, let it go: she won't starve to death, that's for sure — she'll catch an agouti or somethin', a mouse, any critter she finds around. That one'll even eat a porcupine... First thing in the morning, you're gonna see the trail. Wildcat gives off her smell and we'll find her, if we get there early. First thing tomorrow, we'll take a bath. You want to? Ehn? Their smell's stronger where they had their litter and lived with their cubs, it sure does stink. I like it... Now you can just calm yourself down, stay nice and quiet, put that revolver back in your pocket. Uinyua wildcat ain't coming now. She ain't even from over this way. If she crossed the marshes, it was only because Maramonyangara went over there, where her patch is, and then Uinyua got sore at her, and moved away... Everything's got its place: place for drinking water — Tibitaba goes to the pond where the buriti palm's bent over; Maneater drinks in the same place as Suú-Suú, at the head of the Little Swamp... In the middle of the broad swamp there's a flat rock: Maneater swims over there, steps onto the rock, it looks like he's standing up in the water, it's a damn ugly sight. He shakes one leg, then shakes the other, shakes his body dry. He stares around at everything, stares up at the moon... Maneater likes livin' on islands, islands of forest,

oh yeah. Ehn? They don't eat people? Huh! Wildcat stuck his hand through a hole in a hut, grabbed a little kid from his bunk, ripped open his little belly...

'It wasn't here, it was over at the Chapada Nova farmsteads, eh. Old wildcat, huge great tiger of a wildcat, a *pinima* jaguar everyone knew about, the people there had called her Whirlfoot. Little kid's pa was a smallholder, he grabbed his rifle and went after the wildcat, *sacakwera*, *sacakwera*. Whirlfoot wildcat had killed the little kid, and killed a mule. Wildcat that gets up close to people's houses ain't afraid of being chased away, old wildcat, boss cat, eats people, dangerous critter, ain't so different from a man who's wicked. Farmer went after her trail, *sacakwera*, *sacakwera*. *Pinima* walks plenty, she walks a long way the whole night through. But Whirlfoot had eaten, she'd sure eaten some, she'd drunk the mule's blood, drunk some water, she left a trail, went to sleep deep in the forest, in a clearing, all sprawled out. I found the trail, but didn't say anythin', didn't tell anyone. Didn't that farmer say it was his wildcat? Farmer went to get the dogs, a dog let out a yelp, they found the wildcat. Cornered her. Farmer came up, all in a rage and hollerin', but his rifle wouldn't go off. Whirlfoot tore the farmer apart, split open his head, pushed his hair into his brains. They buried the farmer with his little son, or what was left of him, I went along to take a look. They gave me some food, rum, good food; I wept with them too.

'Yeah, then they offered money for anyone who would kill Whirlfoot. I was willing. They talked about tracking her. Uhhh uhhh... How could they track her, find her by her trail? She was a long way off... How they gonna do that? Uhhh uhhh. But I know how. I didn't look for her. I lay down on the spot, smelled her smell. Then I turn into wildcat. I mean, I really turn into a wildcat, huh. I start

yowling... Then I got it. I headed for Little Mill, on the shallows in the marshes. And that was the place: in the early hours of that morning, Whirlfoot had come and eaten up a sow that belonged to one Lima Torquato, a rancher at Saó. Rancher promised more money, too, for me to kill Whirlfoot. I said I was willin'. I asked him to loan me another sow, and tied it to a gum-tree. As night was coming on, Whirlfoot didn't have any notion about me, so she came lookin' for the other sow. But she didn't make it. She only got there early the next morning, when it was gettin' light. She growled, opened her mouth close to where I was, I let her have it right down her throat, and shouted: — "Eat this, old matey!..." Then I got my money from everyone, and got given plenty of food for days and days. They lent me a horse and saddle. Then Mas'r Johnny Guede sent me out here, to clear the place of wildcat. Dirty swine! Lousy no-good! Still, I came.

'I shouldn't have? Uh huh, I know, I should never have come here in the first place. Wildcat is my people, my kinsfolk. They didn't know a thing. Yeah, I'm crafty, real crafty. I ain't afraid. They didn't know I was one of theirs who'd gone bad, who could betray them. All I was afraid of was coming face-to-face one day with a big wildcat that walks with his feet back to front, comin' out of the virgin forest... I wonder if it exists, I wonder. Uhhh uhhh. It's never appeared, I ain't afraid any more. Don't exist. There was a wildcat called One-Paw, who stuck her hand into someone's house too, just like Whirlfoot. The people inside the house got scared. She got her hand caught, they could have gone out and killed her from the outside. But they got scared, and just cut her hand off with a scythe. Wildcat roared, they hacked it off at the wrist. It was a black wildcat. Not one I knew. They hacked off her hand, and so she was able to get away. But she took to scarin' the wits out of

those folks, eating people, eating livestock, leaving three-legged prints, limping about. And no one could guess where she was, so as to catch her. They offered plenty of money; but nothin'. I never knew her. And that was One-Paw. After that, she disappeared off somewhere on this earth. To haunt us..

'Hey, you hear that? That's wildcat yowlin'. You take a listen. He yowled from a long way off. That's Apiponga he-cat, he's just caught a big critter, a wild boar. He's fillin' his belly. He did his killin' at the edge of that island of forest, in the gully, that's where he did his butcherin'. I'm going over there tomorrow. Yeah. You don't know Apiponga: he's the one who roars loudest, and evilest. Yeah — he sure can jump... Every night he's hunting, killing. And when he kills, he does a beautiful job! He eats, and leaves; then, later, he comes back. During the day he sleeps, gettin' warm in the sun, stretched out. A mosquito comes along, ah, he gets annoyed. Go and see for yourself... The place Apiponga likes to sleep during the day is at a wellspring in the forest, where there's a mass of forest, and a big quarry. It's right there that he ate a man... Eeh, phaw! Once, one day, he ate a man...

'Ehn? You want to know where Maria-Maria sleeps during the day? What do you wanna know that for? What for? Her place is in amongst the rosemary in a clearing in the forest, real close to here, so there! Where did that get you? You don't know where it is, hee-hee-hee... If you come across Maria-Maria, it won't count for anythin' that she's the prettiest wildcat — she's gonna scare you to death. Hey: open your eyes: along she comes, here she comes, with her mouth half open, her tongue lollin'... Panting ever so slightly, when it's hot, her tongue lolling this way and that, but it never leaves the roof of her mouth. She pats the ground oh so gently, then stretches right out, and shuts her eyes.

Yeah, she puts her hands out in front of her, opens her fingers right out — sticks out her claws, each one bigger than your little finger. Then she looks at me, she looks at me... She likes me. If I gave you to her to eat, she would...

‘You take a look out here. Moon’s big and round. I’m saying nothin’. Moon ain’t my pal. That’s just bull. You not drinkin’, I get embarrassed, drinking alone, I’m finishin’ up all your rum. Is moon Craoh Indian’s pal? Craoh only ever talked bull. *Awah?* Craoh by name of Curiwan, he wanted to marry white woman. Brought her things, gave ‘em to her; pretty mat, bunch of bananas, tame toucan with a yellow beak, a turtle shell, a white pebble with a blue one inside. Woman had a husband already. Uh huh, but this was the thing: white woman liked things Craoh Curiwan brought her. But she didn’t want to marry him, that would be a sin. Craoh Curiwan started smiling, said he was sick, if only white woman would lie in the hammock with him he’d get cured. No need to get properly married, just enough to lie in the hammock once. He put up his hammock nearby, lay down in it, didn’t eat. Woman’s husband came along, woman told him all about it. White man got mad as hell. Pointed a shotgun at his chest, Craoh Curiwan started crying, white man killed Craoh Curiwan, he was in some helluva temper...

‘Uhhh, uhhh. Hey: I was there, but I never killed anyone. Or at Tiger-Heron, I didn’t kill anyone there, either. I’ve never killed, couldn’t, my ma told me never to kill anyone. I used to be afraid of soldiers. I can’t be locked up: my ma said I can’t be locked up, if I am I’ll die — on account of me being born in the cold season, just when *sejussou* was right bang in the middle of the sky. You look, *sejussou*’s got four little stars, plus two. Okay: can you spot the other one that’s missing? You can’t? That other one — that’s me... My ma told me. My ma a breed, good, real good to

me, same as wildcat with her cubs, her *jaguaraín*. You ever seen wildcat with her little cubs? You ain't? Mom-cat licks and licks, talks to 'em, jagajawjaw, strokes 'em, looks after 'em. Momma wildcat, she'll die for them, won't let anyone get near 'em... It's only *suassurana* that screws up, runs off, abandons her young to whoever wants 'em...

'Eh, my kinsfolk is the wildcat, jaguar, my people. That's what my ma used to say, ma knew, *wey-wey*... Jaguar's my uncle, my uncle. Uh huh. Ehn? But didn't I kill wildcat? So I did, okay, I killed some. But not any more, I don't! At Tiger-Heron, that Pedro Pampolino wanted me to, he wanted to hire me: to kill the other man, to settle a score. I wouldn't. Not me. And get caught by a soldier? There was Tiaguin, he would: he got the money that was meant for me, went and waited for the other man by the side of the road... Ehn, what happened? I dunno, can't remember. I didn't help him out, did I? Didn't want anything to do with it... Tiaguin and Missiano killed plenty of people. Later he did it for an old man. Old man in a rage, swearin' he'd drink the other one's blood, a young man, that's what I heard. Tiaguin and Missiano tied up the younger man, and the old man slit his throat with a machete, caught the blood in a basin... Then I left the job I was doing, went away, ended up stoppin' in Chapada Nova...

'That Mas'r Johnny Guede, had the fat young missy for a daughter, worst man around: he put me here. He said: — "Kill all the wildcat!" He left me here all by myself, jus' me, so alone all I could do was listen to my own voice... By myself the whole time, parakeet flies past squawkin', cricket chirpin' and chirpin' the whole night long, just won't stop chirpin'. Rains come, and it rains and rains. Ain't got no pa or ma. Just used to kill wildcat. Didn't oughta. Wildcat so pretty, my kinsfolk. That Pedro Pampolino said I's no good. Tiaguin said I's a loafer, a lazy deadbeat. Killed heaps a'



wildcat. Mas'r Johnny Guede brought me up here, didn't no one wanna let me work 'longside others... On account of I's no good. Just stay here on my own, whole time. Just weren't no good, didn't know how to work right, didn't like it. Only knew 'bout killin' wildcat. Oh, they didn't oughta! Didn't no one wanna see me, didn't like me, everyone cussin' me. Maria-Maria came along, she did. So was I going to kill Maria-Maria? How could I do that? I couldn't kill any wildcat, wildcat my kinsfolk, I got sad at havin' killed... I was scared about havin' killed. No one at all? Aagh, aagh, gaahh...

'At night I kept tossing and turning, I dunno, tossing and turning 'cause that's all I could do, I couldn't sleep; somethin' starting, and no end to it, I couldn't tell what was goin' on. I got to feeling... A crazy feeling like I wanted to turn into a wildcat, me, me a big wildcat. Go off out into the half light of the early morning, like a wildcat... I was roaring, quietly to myself, deep inside... I had those claws... There was an abandoned den, used to belong to a *pinima* jaguar I'd killed; I went over there. Still a strong smell of her about. I lay down on the ground... Yeah, I get cold, real cold. Cold comin' out from the bush all around, from the fields... I'm shiverin' all over. Nothing like that cold, never known anything like it. Made me tremble like I'd fall to bits... Then I got cramps all over my body, got the shakes; had a fit.

'When I'd got over it, I found myself on all fours, itchin' to walk. What a relief that was! There I was, master of it all, happy I was alone, just fine, everyone dependin' on me... I weren't afraid of anything! Just then, I knew what everyone was thinking. If you'd come along then, I'd know everything you were thinking...

'I knew what wildcat was thinking, too. You know what wildcat thinks? You don't? Eh, take a lesson from me then:

only one thing wildcat thinks — that everything's just fine, real nice, fine, on and on like that, without stopping. That's all she thinks, the whole time, for long stretches, always the same thing, and she keeps thinkin' that as she's walking about, eating, sleeping, doing what she does... When something bad happens, then she whines, growls, goes into a rage, not that she's thinkin' anything: just that second she stops thinkin'. After that, it's only when everything's settled down again that she goes back to thinkin' the same as before...

'Yeah, now you know, don't you? Uh huh. Ehn? Uhn, well I walked out of there on all fours, off I went. Got so mad, felt like killin' everything, tearin' everything apart, tooth and nail... I roared. Eh, I — growled! Next day, white horse of mine, one I brought with me, that they gave me, horse was torn to shreds, half eaten up, dead, I woke up all caked in dried blood... Ehn? No harm, don't like horses, me. . . Horse was lame in the leg, no good any more...

'Then I wanted to see Maria-Maria. Ehn? No, I don't like women... Sometimes I do... I walk the way those wildcat do, through the thorn-bushes, real slow, nice and slow, I don't make a sound. But I don't get pricked, hardly ever. When you get a thorn in your foot, and it goes bad, you get sick for days, can't go hunting, you go hungry... Right, but Maria-Maria, when she gets that way, I take her food to eat, huh, uh huh...

'Uhn, uhn. No, that noise wasn't a wildcat. Urukvera cried out, and some little critter skedaddled out of there. Eh, how'd I know?! Might be a deer, boar, capybara. What's that? You got everythin' here — there's patches of bush, trees sproutin' in the clearings... Otherwise that'll be frogs, wood crickets. Birds too, chirpin' in their sleep... Hey: if I fall asleep first, will you go to sleep too? You can rest your head on that knapsack, knapsack don't belong to no one,

knapsack belonged to black fella. Nothing any good inside there, just some worthless old clothes. There was a picture of black fella's wife, black fella was married. Black fella died, I got the photo, turned it away so I couldn't see it, took it a long way off, hid it in hollow of a trunk. Long way away; I don't like having photos around me...

'Eh, there was a roar then and you didn't hear it. A whisper of a roar... You scared? You ain't scared? That's right, you ain't scared, I can see that. Uhhh uhhh. Eh, if you're close up to 'em, you'll know what being scared means! When wildcat roars, a man gonna shake all over... Spearsman ain't scared, not ever. Eh, it's hard to find a spearsman, there ain't many of them. Spearsman — those people are gutsy... All the rest are scared. Especially black fella...

'Yeah, wildcat likes black fella's flesh. When there's a black fella on a hunting party, wildcat follows along, keeping up without being seen, along secret paths, followin' behind, all the way, all the way, stalking him, keepin' her eye on him. Black fella was praying for his life, held on to the rest of us, shakin' all over. It wasn't the one who lived in the shack; that one who lived here: black fella by name of Tiodoro. It was another black fella, by name of Bijibo, we were following the banks of the Urucuya river, then Dead Creek after that... Old man had a beard, white beard, boots, boots made of boa snakeskin. Old man with the boots had a blunderbuss. He and his kids and the drunk carpenter were heading for the other side, for the Bonita Range, they were cuttin' across that way... Black fella Bijibo weren't a brave man: he had to travel on his own, he was on his way back somewhere — I dunno where — a long way off... Black fella was afraid, he knew there was wildcat waiting in ambush for him: wildcat creeping along, *sacakwera*. every night I knew she was prowling around, making

wawaka, near the campfire...

'Then I talked to the black fella, told him I'd go with him to the Formoso place. He didn't need any weapon, I had a pistol, a rifle, I had a knife, a machete, my spear. I was tellin' lies: as a matter of fact I was coming back here, I'd been to do some tough talking with Mas'r Johnny Guede, to tell him I wasn't going to kill any wildcat from now on, and that was my last word. I was coming back here, I only went so far out of my way on account of the black fella. But black Bijibo didn't know that, he came along with me...

'Hey: as far as I was concerned there wasn't anything wrong with him, I hadn't taken against him, I liked black Bijibo, I felt sorry for him, sure I did, I wanted to help, 'cause he had plenty of good food and supplies, and I was sorry for him having to travel on his own like that... Black Bijibo was a good fella, scared to crazy though, he wouldn't leave me alone for a minute... We walked for three days. Black fella talked and talked. I liked him. Black Bijibo had flour, cheese, salt, molasses, beans, dried meat, a hook for catching fish, salt pork... Halleluja! — black fella carried all that stuff on his back, I didn't help, don't like to, I dunno how he managed it... I did the hunting: I killed deer, guan, tinamou... Black fella would eat it all. Huh! Huh, the way he used to eat and eat, nothing else he wanted to do, I never saw anythin' like it... Black Bijibo did the cooking. He'd give me some of what he'd cooked, and I ate until my belly was stuffed. But black Bijibo didn't stop eating. He'd eat and talk about food, too, so I'd just watch him eat and then eat some more myself, until I felt bloated, and when I'd had enough I'd belch.

'We'd made camp under the branch of a tree, and lit a fire. I watched black Bijibo eat, sittin' there with that crazy look like he was so happy to be eating, the whole day, the whole day, stuffing his face, filling his belly. It made me

mad, real mad, mad as hell... Huaugh, huh! Black Bijibo happily eating away, eatin' all this good food, like he was famished, and along came poor, hungry wildcat, wanting to eat black Bijibo... I got madder and madder. Don't it make you mad? I didn't say nothin'. Uh huh. Right, I just said to black Bijibo that that was the most perilous place, all around there were spotted-wildcat dens. Aw, black fella stopped eating straight away, black fella had trouble gettin' to sleep.

'Yeah, then I weren't mad any more, I fancied having some fun with the black fella. I crept out, real, real quiet, so slow no one could have been slower. I took the food, every little bit, I took it and hid it in the branch of a tree, a long way off. Eh, then I came back, covered over my tracks, eh, I was fit to laugh I was so pleased with myself... I walked a long way, in one direction and then the other, came back and climbed up onto a high branch and stayed hidden... That devil of a she-cat, she just didn't come! First thing the next morning, it was a joy to see, when black Bijibo woke up and didn't find me...

'The whole day he spent crying, lookin' and lookin', and not believing his eyes. Yeah, he was goggle-eyed. Eventually he started walking around in circles, like he'd flipped. He even looked for me inside an anthill... But he was scared of shouting out and conjuring up the wildcat, so he just spoke my name real quiet... Black Bijibo was shaking, I was listening and I could hear his teeth chattering. He was shaking: quiverin' like a piece of meat roastin' on a spit... After that he went into a trance, lay down on the ground, face down, and put his hands over his ears. He covered up his face... I waited the whole day, up in that tree, I was hungry and thirsty too, but now I wanted, I dunno, I just wanted to see the jaguar eatin' the black fella...

'Ehn? No, black fella hadn't done me no harm. Black

Bijibo real fine fella, peace-loving man. I wasn't mad at him any more. Ehn? It wasn't right? How'd you know? You weren't there. Uh huh, black fella weren't my kinsfolk, he shouldn't have got it into his head to come with me. I took the black fella to the wildcat. Whuh? If black fella came with me it was 'cause he wanted to. I just was doing what I was accustomed to... Uhnn, why you feeling about for your revolver? Uhnn uhnn ... Hah, good weapon, is it? Uh huh, good revolver. Whoah! You let me take a hold of it, so I can see it properly... Won't ya, won't ya let me, eh? Don't you like me touching it? Don't be afraid. My hand won't put a jinx on a gun. I don't let anyone touch my gun either, but it's women, women I don't allow; not even to take a look, they ought'n to. They'll put a jinx on it, a hoodoo... Uhnn, uhnn. Yep. Yep. Uhnn, uhnn. Whatever you say...

'Uhnn. Uhnn. Yep. Nope. Eh, *n't, n't*... Huh... Yep. Nossir, I dunno. Uhnn uhnn. Nossir, I ain't sore, it's your revolver, you's the owner. I was jus' asking to take a look, good, fine weapon, revolver... But it won't get jinxed from me touching it, boy no! — I ain't no woman. Na, I ain't hoodoo, I's — lucky man. You won't let me, you don't believe me. I ain't telling no lie... A' right, I'll have another swig. You drink some too! No, I ain't sore at you. Hup, real fine rum...

'Hey: you like hearing stories, a' right, I'll tell you some. After what happened to black Bijibo? Why, I came back. I got here, found another black fella, already living right here inside the shack. First I set to thinking: this must be the other fella's brother, come to take revenge, whuh, whuh... It weren't. Black fella by name of Tiodoro: Mas'r Johnny Guede fixed it for him to take over, and kill all the wildcat, on account of me not wanting to kill any more wildcat. He said the shack was his, Mas'r Johnny Guede had said so,

he'd given the shack to black Tiodoro, for keeps. But I could live with him, I'd have to fetch firewood, fetch the water. Me? Uhhh, me — no, no way.

'I made myself a tepee out of buriti palm, near Maria-Maria's den. Ah ha, black Tiodoro bound to come hunting thereabouts... A' right, a' right. Black Tiodoro didn't hunt wildcat — he'd lied to Mas'r Johnny Guede. Black Tiodoro a fine fella, he was scared, I mean scared, scared to hell. He had four big dogs — barking dogs. Apiponga killed two of them, one disappeared into the bush, Maramonyangara ate up the other one. Heh, heh, heh... Dogs... He didn't catch no wildcat. Besides, black Tiodoro only lived in the shack one turn of the moon: then he died, and that was that.

'Black Tiodoro wanted to see some other folks, and take a walk. He brought me some food, called on me to take a walk with him. Yeah, I know: he was scared of goin' about on his own around those parts. He'd get to the edge of the clearing, and then get all scared of the boa. Me, yeah, I got my good old club, bound with a strong length of vine: I'd slip the vine around my neck, and carry the club hanging there like that: I weren't scared of a thing. Then, black fella... We went a good number of leagues, right into the marshland, good land for farming. Mister Rauremiro, he's honest farming folk, decent man, but he used to whistle at yah, like you was a dog. Am I a dog, eh? Mister Rauremiro used to say: — "You ain't coming into our room, stay out there, you's a breed..." Mister Rauremiro used to talk to black Tiodoro, chat to him. He'd feed me, but he wouldn't talk to me. I left there mad, real mad at them all: Mister Rauremiro, his wife, his daughters, his little boy...

'I called black Tiodoro: after we'd eaten, we were gonna be on our way. Black Tiodoro just wanted to pass by the head of the stream at Winding Path — lie down on the rug with the crazy man's wife, real good woman: Maria

Quirineia. We went to the place. Then, why, they asked me to leave the house for a long while, to keep watch out there in the bush, keep watch on the path, huh, to see if anyone was coming. Plenty of men accustomed to going there. Plenty of men: fugees, plainsmen, those three who died. Close by I saw some tracks. Round tracks, pawprints belonging to Sledgehammer, from her hunting. It was drizzling down, just a fine mist. I hid under a tree. Black Tiodoro weren't comin' out from inside, with that woman in there, Maria Quirineia. The crazy fella, her husband, weren't even hollerin', he must have been sleeping all chained up...

'Why, then I spotted a plainsman coming along, that Mister Rioporo, lousiest fella around, always in a rage. Mister Rioporo was wearing a big cape made of buriti palm, so as not to get his clothes wet, the water was dripping off him and his feet were sticking deep in the mud. I came out from under the tree and went over to meet him, so as to keep him back, stop him coming closer, like black Tiodoro had told me.

— "What you doing around here, you low-down cat-hunter?!" was what he said, what he shouted, shouted at me, real loud.

— "I'm watching the tail-end of this rain..." — I said.

— "Well, you can just go watch the tail-end of your ma, you waster!" — he shouted back, even louder, real loud, he did. He had quite a temper, that one.

'So, shout, would he? Oh boy! My ma, was it? So, that was it. Oh boy! Right then. Right then. So I told him Sledgehammer wildcat was hiding there deep down in the hollow of the gully.

— "Show me, show me this instant..." — he said. And — "Huh, you ain't lying, are you? You lying devil, you'd lie for the hell of it!"



‘But he went over, stopped at the edge of the gully, right at the edge, leaned over, peering down. And I pushed him over! I pushed him ever so gently, just nudged him: Mister plainsman Rioporo went flyin’ through the air... Hup! Ehn, what’ya say? Kill him, did I kill him? No I didn’t, so there. He was still alive when he landed down there, when wildcat Sledgehammer started eatin’ him up... Fine, handsome! Heh, *p’s*, heh *poran* my beauty! Take a bite of that, uncle...

‘I didn’t say nothin’ to the black fella: hey... Woman named Maria Quirineia gave me some coffee, told me I was a handsome Indian. Then we left. Black Tiodoro kept quiet, he was mad at me. ‘Cause I knew how to hunt wildcat, and he didn’t. I was smart as a fox, knew the place like the back of my hand, I knew where to find the creatures, the trees, the plants in the forest, every one of ‘em, and he didn’t. I had all those hides, and I wasn’t gonna sell them, ever. He was staring at them, greedy like a dog, I reckon he wanted all those hides for himself, to sell ‘em and make a stack of money... Oh, black Tiodoro told lies about me to the other plainsmen.

‘That fujee Gugué, a decent man, but I mean decent, he never cussed at me. I’d want to take a walk, but he didn’t like to: he just lay there, in his hammock, in the grass, the whole day long, the whole day. He’d even ask me to fetch some water in the calabash, for him to drink. Didn’t do nothin’. He’d sleep, smoke, stretch himself out on his back, and chatter away. Me too. That Gugué could sure talk the hind leg off a donkey! Eh, didn’t do nothin’ else, didn’t go hunting, wouldn’t do a little digging to pull up some cassava roots, wouldn’t go walking. So I decided I wasn’t going to keep lookout for him no more. Eh, no, I weren’t mad, just sick of it. Know what I mean? You seen anything like it? Idle, bone idle, that fella, malingerin’ just for the hell of it, phaw, that was some jinx! I stopped caring in the end... I

didn't want to get mad at him, didn't want to do anything, I didn't, no I didn't. A decent man. I said I was leaving.

— “Don't go...” — he said. — “Let's talk...” But he just slept and slept the whole day long. Then all of a sudden, eh, I turned wildcat... Right. Couldn't take it no more. I got some vine, fixed me a good, strong cord. I tied that Gugué to his hammock. Tied him quick, by his arms, by his legs. When he was about to start hollerin', uhnn, paah! I didn't let him, huh: I got some leaves, and then some more, and stuffed them all down his throat. There weren't no one around. I picked up old Gugué, all rolled up in his hammock. Heavy he was, yeah, weighed a ton. I took him to Maneater. Maneater, chief of the wildcat, a big tom, he ate up fujee Gugué... Maneater, huge great bruiser of a wildcat, he snarls and snarls while he's eating, you'd take him for a young cub... Afterwards, I got to feeling sad and sorry for old Gugué, such a decent fella, poor devil...

'Then, it being dark by that time, I went to have a talk with the other plainsman that was still left, by the name of Antunias, why, he was a fujee. That was some mean skinflint! He never gave anything away, nah, he kept it all for himself, he'd lend you a lead pellet but only if you paid him two in return. Phaw! Paah... I went over to him, he was eating, so he hid his food under the wicker basket, I saw him do it. Then I asked if I could sleep inside the shack. — “All right then. But go and fetch some twigs for the fire...” — he said, just to annoy me. — “Hey, it's after nightfall, it's dark, first thing in the morning I'll gather some real nice firewood...” — was what I said. But then he ordered me to fix an old sandal of his. Said that early next morning he was going over to Maria Quirineia's place, and I couldn't stay in the shack on my own, in case I meddled with his stuff. So then I said: — “I reckon wildcat's got Gugué...”

'Hey, Tunia!' — that was how Gugué used to talk to

him. He stared at me, asked how come I reckoned so. I said I'd heard Gugué shouting and the roar of a wildcat filling her belly. You know what he said? You ever heard the like of this? Huh! He said that wildcat had got Gugué, so everything that belonged to Gugué was his now. And soon he was leaving for the other range of mountains, and did I want to go along, and carry all his gear, his hammock an' all. — "Sure do..." — said I.

'Oh, but I ain't gonna tell what happened next, no I ain't, no I ain't, no way! Why you wanna know? You a policeman?... Okay, okay, I'll tell you, you my friend. I raised the tip of my spear to him... Let me show you how, won't you? Oh, won't you, can't I? You scared of me pressin' the tip of my spear against your chest, eh, is that it, eh? So why you askin', then?! Huh, you a weak fella... You afraid the whole time... Right then, he was obliged to keep walking, crying all the way, *sacemo*, in the dark, falling down, getting up again... — "You're not to shout out, you're not to shout out..." — I told him, nagging at him, prodding and pushing him with the tip of my spear. I took him off to Maria-Maria...

'Early next morning, I felt like some coffee. I thought to myself: I could call in on someone for breakfast, ask that woman Maria Quirineia. I headed over there, keeping an eye out: Chriis'! On every side, on the slopes of the plain, there were wildcat tracks... Hey, wildcat o' mine... But they all gotta know who I am, yeah, I'm their kinsfolk — yeah, otherwise I'll set the fields alight, and the forest too, the caves in the bush, their lairs, I'll set it all alight, as soon as the drought's over...

'That Maria Quirineia, she's a real good woman. Gave me some coffee, some food. Her crazy husband, mister Suruveio, he was quiet, it weren't his time to be moonstruck, he was just laughin' away, he was, but not shoutin'. Yeah,

but Maria Quirineia started lookin' at me peculiar like, in a different sort of way: her eyes a-sparklin', smiling, nostrils flaring, and she took hold of my hand, stroked my hair. Said I was handsome, real handsome. Me — I liked that. But then she tried to pull me down onto the rug with her, hey, whoah, whoah... I got so darn mad, real mad, mad as hell, I wanted to kill Maria Quirineia, feed her to wildcat Tatacica, feed her to all the wildcat!

'Yeah, then I got up, and I was going to grab Maria Quirineia by the throat. But then she said something: — "Hey: your ma must have been real pretty, a mighty fine woman, I guess, am I right?" That Maria Quirineia sure was a good woman, and pretty too, I was real fond of her, I remember that. I said everyone had got killed, eaten up by wildcat, and she oughta take herself off and move home, right that minute, just go, just go, right now... Anywhere else, but she should leave. Maria Quirineia got mighty scared, scared as hell, said she couldn't leave, on account of her crazy husband. I said I'd help take him along. Take him as far as the Conceição Marshes, there were folk there she knew. Yeah, I went along with them. That crazy husband of hers hardly gave me any trouble. I'd say: — "Shall we take a walk, Mas'r Suruveio, sir, just a bit further?" He'd answer: — "A' right, let's go, let's go, let's go..." It was high tide on the marshes, rainy season, that was what gave us the bother. But we got there, and Maria Quirineia said her farewells: — "You's a decent man, brave man, handsome man. But you ain't fond of women..." Then I said: — "Dead right I ain't. I — I got big claws..." She laughed and laughed and laughed, and I went back on my own, skirting round all them marshes.

'Why then, why, after that I took a wide berth, found a way round the back of them swamps: I didn't want to see farming man Mister Rauremiro. I was hungry, but I wouldn't take any food from him — too high and mighty, that one. I

ate some custard apple and sweet beans, and took a rest next to a thicket. After an hour it turned real cold, I mean real cold, set me walking in a different direction... Eh, after that, I dunno: I woke up — and I was in the farming man's house, it was just before daybreak. I was lying in a thick mess of blood, my nails all red with blood. Farming man had been bitten to death, farming man's wife, daughters, little boy... Hey, deadly *jucca* tree knockin', huh, hugggh! Then I felt sorry, started feelin' sore. Uhhh, eh? You say I killed 'em? I bit 'em but I didn't kill 'em... I don't want to be locked up... I had their blood in my mouth, on my face. Uhhh, I went outside, wandered by myself through the forest, out of my mind, must be what comes from climbing all them trees, yeah, forest's a real big place... I walked and walked, couldn't tell you for how long. But when I'd come to again, I was all naked, starvin' hungry. Covered in all kind of filth, earth, with a bitter taste in my mouth, aagh, bitter like peroba bark... I was stretched out on that very spot, amongst the rosemary. Maria-Maria came right up to me...

'You listenin', eh? You getting my drift... Didn't I tell you, I's a wildcat! Hughh. Didn't I say — I'm turning wildcat? Great big chief wildcat. Look at my claws: you look — dirty great claws, black claws... Come 'ere, smell me: don't I stink of wildcat? Black Tiodoro said I do, eh, eh... Every day I wash my body in the pond... But why don't you go to sleep, uhhh, uhhh, don't keep waiting on your partner. You's sick, you should lie down on the pallet. Wildcat won't come around here, you can put your revolver away...

'Huuuh! You ever killed anyone with it? So you did, did you? Why didn't you say so right away? Uh huh, you really did kill someone. How many d'you kill? You kill plenty? Uh huh, you's a brave man, my friend... Yeah, let's

drink some rum, enough to make our tongues sting like we been eatin' sand... I'm picturing somethin' real fine, real nice: why don't we go and kill your partner tomorrow? We'll kill your partner, bad, no-good partner, he let horse run off into the forest... Let's do some killin'?! Aaww, aaww, back off, stay where you are! You're real sleepy... Hey: you ain't seen Maria-Maria, that's right, you ain't. You oughta. Before long she'll be here, if I want she'll come, come and gobble you up...

'Ehn? Ah right, okay... All that time I was lying in the rosemary with her, you should have seen us. Maria-Maria makes all sorts of faces, paws the ground, jumps sideways, light on her feet, the way wildcat do, real pretty, real nice. Her backbone bristles, she puffs up her tail, opens and shuts her mouth, gentle, like someone who's sleepy... Like you, eh, eh... She walks along, swayin' slow and easy, she ain't scared of a thing, raising her haunches one after the other, with her shiny coat, along she comes, thoughtful like, the prettiest wildcat of them all, real solemn... She was growlin' softly at me, she wanted to come along with me and catch black Tiodoro. That's when I felt that cold, cold chill, cramps all over... Yeah, I'm skinny, I can slip through the smallest crack, but the black fella was pretty fat... Along I crept, on all fours... Black Tiodoro's eyes were scared crazy, phaw, they were looking huge... Started roarin'!...

'You enjoy that, huh? Black fella weren't no good, eh, eh, eh... Hey: you're okay, though, you my friend... Here: let me take a proper look at you, let me grab a hold of you for a second, just for a second, lay my hand there...

'Hey, hey, what you doin'?

'Turn that revolver away! Stop foolin' around, point the revolver the other way... I ain't movin', I'm keepin' still, real still... Hey: you wanna kill me, whuh? Chuck the revolver over there, go on! You's sick, you's delirious...

You come here to arrest me? Hey: no, I ain't puttin' my hands on the ground for any reason, no particular reason... So damn cold ... You crazy?! Huggh! Get outah here, this shack's mine, gerraway! Back off! You kill me, your partner come and have you arrested... Wildcat's gonna come, Maria-Maria, she's gonna eat you... Wildcat my kinsfolk... Eh, on account of the black fella? I didn't kill no black fella, I was just foolin'... Here comes wildcat! Whoah, whoah, you's a decent fella, don't do that to me, don't kill me... Me — Macuncozo... Don't, no, don't... . Ehh ehh ehhn... Heeyah!...

'Heh... Aargh-aagh... Aaah... You grrraaazed me... Remuassi... Reyucaanasseh... Aaawwh... Uuhn... Whoah... Whoah... Uh... uh... eeehh... eeh... eh... eh...'

If you will join me, I shall relate something to you; not an adventure, but an experiment I was persuaded to undertake after following various, alternate trains of reasoning and intuition. It cost me time, much loss of heart and a good deal of effort. Without wishing to boast, it is a source of pride to me. Nevertheless, I am surprised to find myself somewhat removed from all other people, delving into knowledge of which everyone else is still ignorant. You, sir, for example, who are knowledgeable and studious, I imagine you haven't the slightest idea of what might truly constitute — a mirror? Aside, for sure, from the notions with which you will have gained some familiarity from physics, the laws of optics. I am alluding to the transcendent. Incidentally, all things are merely the tip of a mystery. Even facts. Or their absence. Do you doubt me? When nothing happens, there is a miracle that is unseen by us.

Let us concentrate on concrete matters. The mirror, and there are many mirrors able to capture your features; all of them will reflect your face, and so you believe yourself to be in the presence of your own, practically unaltered appearance, of which they are giving you a faithful image. But — which mirror? There are “good” ones and “bad” ones, those that reflect favourably and those that detract; and those that are just honest, of course. And where might we pinpoint the exact degree and extent of that honesty or faithfulness? What, visibly, are we really like, you or I or any of these fellows still among us? You will say: the proof lies with photographs. I reply: that, not only do analogous objections hold true for the camera lens, but their results also support rather than refute my thesis, so clearly do they reveal how the marks of the mysterious come to be superimposed onto iconographic facts. Even if taken in



straight succession, photographic portraits will always be *very* different from each other. If you have never remarked upon this, then that is because we spend our lives incorrigibly heedless of the most important things. What about masks, those moulded to people's faces? They are good for achieving a roughly hewn approximation to someone's profile, but not when it comes to an expression bursting into life, the dynamism of physiognomies. Do not forget, we are dealing here with subtle phenomena.

You still have one argument remaining: anybody can, at a given time, see both another person's face and its reflection in the mirror. Without any chicanery, I shall refute this. The experiment, which incidentally has yet to be *rigorously* carried out, would be lacking in all scientific value in light of the irreducible distortions, of a psychological order, that it would entail. Attempt it, moreover, and you will meet with some remarkable surprises. Besides which, simultaneity is impossible while the elements are in their instantaneous state of flux. Ah, time is the magician of every act of treachery... And our eyes, everyone's eyes, suffer from a congenital impairment, defects that have remained with them as they have grown and to which they have become increasingly accustomed. To begin with, the little child sees objects upside down, hence her clumsy, groping gestures; only gradually does she manage to rectify her precarious eyesight from the way that external shapes are positioned. However, other flaws persist, more serious ones. For now, our eyes are the gateway to deception; be suspicious of them, of yours that is, not mine. Oh, my friend, the human species struggles to impose upon a tumultuous world some measure of routine and logic, but something or someone everywhere finds a chink in the armour so as to laugh at us... And then what?

Note that my observations are restricted to the category of flat mirrors, those in everyday use. But what about the rest — concave, convex, parabolic ones — not to mention the possibility of others, as yet undiscovered? For example, a three- or four-dimensional mirror? This does not strike me as an absurd hypothesis. Skilled mathematicians have managed, after some mental training, to construct four-dimensional objects, using for the purpose small, variously coloured blocks, like those that children play with. Do you doubt me?

I can see that you are beginning to set aside some of your initial suspicion as to my soundness of mind. Nevertheless, let us keep to more mundane matters. At amusement parks we laugh at those grotesque mirrors that reduce us to monstrosities, all stretched out or squashed up. But if we only use flat ones — and on the contours of a coffee-pot one can find a passable convex mirror, and on a polished spoon a reasonable concave one — that is because humanity first gazed at itself in the surfaces of still water, marshes, springs, learning by their example to make the aforementioned implements of metal or glass. Teiresias, however, had once predicted to the handsome Narcissus that he would live only as long as he did not set eyes upon himself... Yes, they are to be feared, mirrors.

I feared them from boyhood, out of an instinctive distrust. Animals, too, refuse to look at them face-on, save for certain credible exceptions. I come from up-country, as do you, sir; where I am from, it is said that one should never look into a mirror at the dead hours of the night, if one is alone. Because in them, sometimes, in place of our image we will be startled by some other fearful vision. Nevertheless, I am a straightforward, rational being, I have my feet set firmly and squarely on the ground. Would I be satisfied with fanciful non-explanations? — never. What,

then, could that fearful vision possibly be? Who is the Monster?

Was my fear perhaps a conjuring up of ancestral impressions? The mirror used to inspire a superstitious fear in primitive peoples, who held the idea that a person's reflection was his soul. As a rule, as well you know, sir, superstition is a fertile point of departure for research. The mirror's soul — mark it well — a splendid metaphor. Others actually identified the soul with the body's shadow; and that light-dark polarization cannot have escaped you. Did people not use to cover up mirrors, or turn them to the wall, when someone in the house was dying? If, as well as employing them in the tricks of magic, whether imitative or sympathetic, seers used them as they did the crystal ball, glimpsing in their field of vision the outlines of future facts, then might that not be because, through mirrors, time appears to change direction and speed? However, I digress. I was recounting how...

It was in the lavatory of a public building, as it happened. I was a young man, self-satisfied and vain. Unsuspecting of anything, I caught sight of... Let me explain: there was a play of mirrors — one on a wall, the other on a side-door, open at a favourable angle. And what I caught sight of, for just an instant, was a figure, a human profile, disagreeable in the extreme, repulsive if not hideous. He made me feel sick, that man, he aroused in me a loathing and a dread, a terror that set my hair on end. And it was — I soon discovered... it was I, myself! Do you imagine, sir, that I was ever going to forget that revelation?

From that moment onward, I began searching for myself — for the me behind myself — in the mirrors' surface, in their smooth, deep glass, in their cold light. That was something that, as far as we know, had never before been attempted. Whoever looks at himself in a mirror, does so

from the starting-point of affective prejudice, of a more or less fallacious assumption: no-one truly believes himself to be ugly: at most, we dislike ourselves at certain moments because we are temporarily at variance with a received aesthetic ideal. Am I making myself clear? What is sought, in those cases, is to verify, to pinpoint, to work upon a subjective, pre-existing model; in short, to expand upon that which is illusory by means of new successive layers of illusion. I, on the other hand, was an impartial, absolutely neutral investigator. A hunter after my own formal appearance, driven by an otherwise impersonal, disinterested curiosity; not to mention the scientific impulse. It took me some months.

Instructive months, it is true. I operated with all kinds of cunning: the lightning-quick glance, the sidelong flash of the eyes, the long, finely honed squint, the surprise counter-attack, the feinting flicker of the eyelids, the ambush with the light suddenly switched on, incessantly varying angles. Above all, a patience that would not be dulled. I would gaze at myself, too, at fixed moments — of anger, fear, swollen or downcast pride, extreme joy or sadness. Enigma upon enigma was revealed to me. If you, sir, for example, in a state of hatred, objectively confront your image, the hatred will recede and then swell up again, redoubled many times over: and then you will see that, in fact, it is only you yourself that you hate. Eyes staring back at eyes. That was something I discovered: there is no end to our eyes. They alone remained still, unchanging, at the heart of the secret. If not actually mocking me from the other side of a mask. For everything else about the face was permanently changing. You sir, like the others, cannot see that your face is merely a deceptive, constant state of movement. You cannot see this, because you are inattentive and inured to it; I would even say you are still dormant, yet

to develop even the most necessary perceptive faculties. You do not see, any more than is commonly the case, the movements made around the Sun and on its own axis by this planet Earth, on which your and my feet are firmly planted. I pray you, do not excuse me; but do understand me.

That being the case, I needed to render transparent the veil, the visor of that *mask*, in order to expose the core of this nebula — my true form. There had to be a way. I ruminated upon it. The surest inspirations came to my aid.

I concluded that, given the interpenetration of various components in the disguise of the *external face*, my problem would be to subject them to a “visual” block or perceptive obliteration, the suspension of each, one by one, right down to the most rudimentary, or uncouth, or those of inferior significance. I took the animal element, to start with.

That each one of us resembles a certain creature, recalling its countenance, is a fact. I simply register this point, nothing more; far be it from me to harp on about themes of metempsychosis or biogenetic theories. I had, incidentally, become fully informed of the subject from a master in the science of Lavater. What is your view? When it comes to ovine or equine faces and heads, for example, one has only to cast a glance over the crowd or examine one’s acquaintances to recognise that there are indeed many. My double lower down the scale, however, was — the wildcat. I confirmed that for myself. And so, after meticulously breaking them down, I was going to have to learn *not to see*, in the mirror, those features in me that recalled the big feline. I threw myself into the task.

Forgive me if I do not detail the method or methods of which I availed myself, and which alternated between the most searching analysis and the strenuous effort of abstraction. Even the preparatory stages would be enough

to terrify anyone less disposed to arduous work. Like all cultivated men, you will not be unfamiliar with Yoga, and will have practised it before now, if only in its most elementary techniques. And as for the “spiritual exercises” of the Jesuits, I know of philosophers and thinkers who, though unbelievers, nevertheless cultivate them in order to deepen their capacity for concentration alongside the creative imagination... In short, I will not conceal from you my having resorted to somewhat empirical means: dimmer switches, coloured lamp-bulbs, phosphorescent ointments in the dark. Only one contrivance did I reject, as mediocre if not phoney, which was that of employing alternative substances in the silvering of the mirrors. But it was above all in the *modus* with which I focused, in my partially distracted gaze, that I had to become skilled: to look without-seeing. Without seeing what, in “my” face, was nothing more than a bestial throwback. Could I do this?

You should know that I was pursuing an experiential reality, not an imaginary hypothesis. And I can tell you that I was making real progress in this operation. Little by little, in the mirror’s field of vision, I was presented with a reproduction of my face that was full of gaps, and whose excrescences were becoming diminished, nearly erased altogether. I pressed on. By now, though, determined to apply the treatment simultaneously to the other contingent and illusory components. So to the hereditary element — the resemblances to parents and grandparents — which are also, in our faces, a kind of residual evolutionary padding. Oh, my friend, not even inside its egg is the chick safe. And after that, whatever might be due to the contagion of passions, whether manifest or latent, whatever has come to the fore as a result of chaotic, transitory psychological pressures. And following that, whatever in our faces materialises the ideas and suggestions of others; and

ephemeral interests without consequence or precedence, without connections or depth. We should need days to explain it all to you. I would rather you took my claims at face value.

As I worked with increasing mastery on this process of exclusion, dissociation and abstraction, my model of perspective began to split up in labyrinthine fashion, in the manner of a cauliflower or cow's stomach, and in the pattern of a mosaic, honeycombed with cavities, I should say, like a sponge. And a darkness fell over it. About that time, despite the care I was taking with my health, I began to suffer from headaches. Had I lost my nerve, no less? Pardon my embarrassment, sir, at the change of tone with which I must convey such a human confidence, on a note of unexpected, unworthy weakness. But remember Terence. Yes, the ancients; I am reminded that they represented Prudence as an allegorical divinity, precisely with a mirror encircled by a serpent. All of a sudden, I abandoned my investigation. Indeed, for several months I stopped looking at myself in any mirror at all.

But in the ordinary, everyday passing of time, we recover our calm, and much is left forgotten. Taken in long stretches, time always passes peacefully. And perhaps, too, I had, unawares, been bitten by the bug of curiosity. One day... Forgive me, I am not aiming at those kinds of effect employed by writers of fiction, deliberately adding a poignant inflection to the situations being recounted. All I shall tell you is that I looked at myself in a mirror and did not see myself. I did not see anything. Just the smooth, featureless countryside, open like the sun and the crystal-clear water to the scattering of the light, imperviously whole. Did I have no profile, no face? I ran my hands searchingly across it. But no; this was the unseen one. The sham. The one devoid of physical evidence. Was I, then — the

transparent viewer?... I withdrew. A giddiness came over me and I fell into an armchair.

So then, during those months of rest, the faculty for which I had previously been searching had begun to function within me of its own accord! Would it continue to forever? I tried again to take a look at myself. Nothing. What is more, and this truly seized me with terror: I could not see my eyes. In the gleaming, polished void, not even they were reflected back at me!

In summary, having set out to attain a progressively simplified face, I had literally stripped myself right down to the point of complete self-effacement. And the awful conclusion was this: was there no central, personal, autonomous being within me? Was I... soul-less? So then, what was posing as my would-be *self*, was this nothing more than an animalistic survival, added to a bit of heredity, a few instincts here and there, some extraneous passional energy, intersecting influences, and everything else that hovers elusively in impermanence? That is what the mirror's luminous rays and empty face were telling me — with unswerving faithlessness. And was it like this with everyone? Were we all little more than children — the spirit of life no more than spasmodic impulses flashing amidst mirages: hope and memory.

But, sir, you must be thinking that I am delirious, that I have lost my way, confusing the physical, the hyperphysical and the transphysical, outside any modicum of rational equilibrium or logical orientation — I realise that now. You must be thinking that, from what I have said, nothing can be settled, nothing proves anything. Even if it were all true, it must in reality be nothing more than a shabby, auto-suggestive obsession, the nonsensical claim that a psyche or a soul could be reflected in a mirror...

I admit you are right. There is the point, however, that I



am a bad storyteller, rushing headlong into the conclusions before the facts, quite so: putting the cart before the horse and the reins before the cart. Do forgive me. And allow the ending of my chapter to bring some light to bear on what has so far been set out so clumsily and precipitately.

They are events very much of an intimate nature, rather peculiar in character. If I recount them now, I do so in utter confidence. I am embarrassed. I must make the briefest summary of them.

So it was that, years later, after a time of great suffering, I once again met myself — and it was not face to face. The mirror simply displayed me. Listen carefully. For a while I could make nothing out. Only then, later: the tenuous beginnings of something resembling a light clouding over and then, gradually, tentatively, flickering feebly, then radiantly into life. Did its slightest wavering really move me, or was it already contained within my emotion? What glimmer was that, which issued from me and lingered there, caught in the reflection? Draw your own conclusions, sir, if you will.

These are things we should not glimpse; at least, not beyond a certain point. Things are different, as I was able to discern much later — at long last — in a mirror. About that time, and please excuse this detail, I had begun to love — learning, that's to say, about resignation and joy. And... Yes, I saw myself again, my face, a face; not this one, that you quite reasonably attribute to me. But the face-yet-to-be — only just an outline — barely emerging, like a flower from the ocean's floor, born from the abyss... And it was nothing but: a little boy's face, a not-quite-little-boy's face, nothing more. Nothing more. I wonder if you will ever understand?

Maybe I should tell you these things, maybe I should not, for reasons such as... perhaps. These things that I am

saying, and uncovering, and inferring. I wonder if? Am I grasping at what is evident? My search is relentless. Can it be that this ramshackle world of ours is the plane — the intersecting planes — where the making of souls is accomplished?

If so, then does “life” not amount to some extraordinary and very serious experiment; whose technique — or at least part of it — demands that one consciously casts aside or strips away everything that is obstructing the soul’s growth, that is choking it or bogging it down? Afterwards, the “*salto mortale*” ... — I use the phrase like this, not because it was revived by Italian acrobats, but because everyday expressions that have become dulled need a fresh ring and flavour to them... And the final judgment-cum-problem, that might well follow upon the simple question: — “*Did you ever exist?*”

Am I right? But in that case, isn’t the notion that we live in an agreeable state of blind chance, devoid of all reason, in a vale of nonsense, irretrievably destroyed? I have said my piece. If you will permit me, I shall now await your very own opinion, sir, about the said matter. I entreat you to make whatever observations you see fit to offer me, your humble servant, your new-found friend, but above all your associate in the love of science, of the truths it hits erringly upon and stumbles falteringly across. You will?

## IN THE NAME OF THE GRANDFATHER

Before we begin: — No. Let no accusation of petty ambition or meanness be levelled at us people of decent stock, in this fine world that God rules over; we, the Dandrades Pereiras Serapiaens, well-endowed with fair fortune and pedigree, like a bunch of grapes perched plumply on the vine. It was not out of sordid impatience or eagerness for our will & inheritance but, rather, reluctantly that we hastened, some by train, others by car, to the old mountain town, where in this half of the ancestral seat and manor-house, overlooking Church Square, our unbending, obdurate and awe-inspiring Grandpapa Baron, the unequivocal head of the family, was preparing in his tacit turn to pass away. Which was in every way incongruous. We were coming, then, not *pro nobis*, but to pay our temporal respects. As you will see. Moreover, all this meant that a gap was being filled.

Nor should one expect, by expanding upon the facts related here, to uncover some unforgettable farce or comic detail, of the kind that leaves no community unscathed on such occasions. Families are a pact between eyes and portraits, let it be stressed; far be it from me ever to mock my own, even mildly. Whatever is, will be no more; as I'm not wont to say. I'm not short of sympathy and fellow-feeling for all of them and their ways; even, and in a most particular sense — given a certain important event that is close to my heart, of which I shall presently speak, indeed am longing to — for Uncle Nestorionestor, my hero with a fruitless, stale old sham of a cause. If possible, then, I should prefer it if you maintained henceforward a sense of gravity — about your wishful thinking. Everything to the contrary, which is only normal, arises solely from people's fickle false-heartedness: it lies in the innate untruthfulness of all

character-individuals. We do not see when we are building castles in the air. Who can know the words to the cockerel's song? Oh, amazing life. Death is so ordinary.

So, Grandpapa Baron had always absented himself like some inviolate, intransigent hermit, though he was himself a topic of conversation: as it is the fate of towers to be conspicuous, and belches, too. Supreme in his claim to absolute pre-eminence, pedestal and shanks clad in iron, he would only admit our presence — ours, the relatives and descendants, I mean — in the midst either of solemnity or buffoonery. To approach him was to court hapless disaster. By way of exception, there was his little granddaughter, lovely as was this love of mine; but you could not see etched in his grimace or scowl that sweet blunder of heredity. Utterly sure of himself, quite oblivious to the primeval chaos and closed to all manifest evidence of the invisible, he did not know what it was he feared so much, deep down; and that, then, was why he was mouldering away in all his insufferable self-importance. The poetry had fallen away from him forever, like the stump of his shrivelled-up navel. He was a man of pronouns. He laid categorical claim to history and to space.

But not to any wealth of biographical detail. For the bulk of his years he had spent in a sedentary state there, overlooking the square facing the church, as I have told you. To begin with, in the entire domain of the baronial, mansion-house apartments that he could boast were his right through birth and possession. Later, by now an out-and-out scoundrel, lord and master, devil-may-care, living exclusively in this part of the house — and presently we shall explain why. There, with his maids, between three and six of them, who shall remain nameless, along with a servant who defied caricature, named Bugaboo — attendant, valet, washer of chamberpots, also commonly called

Ratflea, and pay close attention to that one! — he lived back in the time of the pyramids. That's to say, so selfish was he that what he most treasured and hoarded was himself. Even though he was present, real, in the here and now, and very much so, for still he clung on, wallowing in the water that had passed beneath his bridge. Or in that time that moves monotonously in leaps and bounds towards the Greek Calends, when he would turn up trumps. He, and the doorman-cum-potty carrier Ratflea or Bugaboo, no less. Let it also be said: like the king and jack — listen carefully — out of some pack of cards that has been shuffled, dealt and played.

— “*Out of some farce!...*” — my Uncle Nestornestorio must surely be mumbling contemptuously, in his, to me, hollow or perhaps embittered heart. And Ratflea, all the while, had been greeting my Uncle Nestornestorio with bowed reverence. Not one for gesticulation, Ratflea neither smiled nor made any sign. He had a way of turning hierarchies and distances upside down. To tell the truth, the antithesis of Grandpapa Baron, you might fancy. But Grandpapa Baron was profligate in his storytelling, he had a weakness for reciting narratives. In a kind of a way, he had, as it were, voluntarily and prematurely, — sub- or pseudo-, or whatever — widowed himself some time before actually becoming a widower; a bizarre case, as we shall see, but true. And could it be that — as solemn as a man in a mask, as tricky as a sprung safe, as hard as a crystal rock — Grandpapa Baron simply represented the Dandrades Pereiras Serapiaens in their final, third mutation, raised to the nth degree of error?

He was not even a baron, he had never had full right to the title. Although he did have the measure of it. He would sit the majority of the time in the reception-room, in the hard, solid chair, one of whose arms could be dropped down,

in order to write, for example, or place things on it; just as, underneath, you could draw out a kind of footstool, in the same dark-stained wood. He would remain there a good while — with a glass of water and a silver teaspoon, and his box of bicarbonate on one side of him, and on the other the briefcase in which he kept the stubs from his tax payments, and in addition, piled up around him on the floor, the newspapers he would read over and again — blinking like a dragon or a chameleon from a magic-lantern show: a man of action, but one who suffered from migraine. Just as Great-Grandfather Dandradaon Serapiaens had sat there, snuff between his fingers, a handkerchief in his other hand in readiness for his explosive bouts of sneezing, his life regulated by ailments and almanacs, and his legs wrapped in an English rug in the winter months. And as had Great-Great-Grandfather Serapiaon Pereira de Andrade, the founding father who was Minister of the Emperor in the days of yore, keeping within his immediate reach on the stool some object or other, we shall never know what; any more than we shall ever know what went on deep within him, apart from his implacable yawning. But all their thoughts, one must imagine, were filled with swearing and cursing, and their eyes with the hoarseness of it. That armchair was quite some lady, it was big, larger than life; it stood near the writing-desk, next to a window from which, without really being seen, you could survey all the hustle-and-bustle of the Church and the Square: Grandpapa Baron, however, more often sat with his back to the latter.

From there, he would set off for days and weeks to visit his Rich Harvest Farm — whose name he had tried in vain to change to Archangel Saint Michael, Fine-Dawn or Liberty Farm — riding a roan horse, tall and proud, ostentatiously fitted out and breaking wind, two long-legged fellows following him, on foot usually, to carry the bags

and open gates; and it was said of these individuals, who were armed to the back teeth, that they were his hired thugs. He would also go to church, to mass, but invariably wearing his dressing-gown, a bed-jacket and slippers, this man who indoors nearly always wore high boots or dancing-shoes, if not thick, strong, creaking ankle-boots, as the mood took him, and squeezed into a tight green, red or blue waistcoat, and a hat shaped to fit his head. Still, they showed him their respect, even the priest made way for him, and they put up with all his eccentricity. He hardly shook anyone's hand from the neighbourhood, and didn't address a word to anybody in the street. If his vast half of the living space had had its windows painted over pitch-black, it had been on his instructions, conveyed via his perennial, succinct: — "*Cause that's how I want it...*"; and soon all will be explained. For now, the most we will divulge is his strict refusal to submit to the will of God; rather, his abundant self-love had skewed the shaft of the pendulum this way rather than that. We feared Grandpapa Baron as a matter of tradition. Now, however, and that was the word: however. Did the man himself ever have any notion of the term? He was at his summit, ready to die, and no two ways about it. He was approaching the end. It was for this, because of this, that we, his flesh and blood, were gathering in haste.

Yes, all the offspring born and bred of Grandmama Olegaria and Grandpapa Baron, with the only exception, however, of my Uncle Osorio Nelsonino Herval, a poet, a usurer, it was said, who dealt in new, encyclical melancholies, an honest man, though, now deceased. But there was the leisured capitalist Bayard Metternich Aristoteles, my father; and Uncle Pelopidas Epanimondas, an industrialist; Uncle Nestornestorio, a judge; Uncle Noé Arquimedes Eneas, Nearqueneias or commonly known as Nó, for short. As well as the aunts: Amelia Isabel Carlota,

a foolish spinster; Clotilde de Vaux Penthesileia, Admiral Contrapaz's widow; Cornelia Vitoria Hermengarda, with her husband, João Gastão, no profession; and Teresa Leopoldina Cristina, who eloped and married Cicero M. Mamoens, known as the "Reveller".

They arrived separately, every crooked eyebrow perfectly in place. Standing on ceremony. Uncle Nestorionestor — certain things you are bound, after all, to gather from these lines — most of all. I must say, by way of correction: most of all and most essentially, and that's a fact, his daughter Alexandrina — Drina as she was known familiarly and to my very soul — first and foremost. For there were some of us, too, from the younger generations. Let me speak first of myself.

Well then, it happened that I loved dear cousin Drina, as is the customary inclination of the Pereiras and Serapiaens and Dandrades, and the annals will confirm it, to court and become engaged and married to each other. To which we should add that, at first, this had been a custom inculcated by the older folk, in order that the wealth and ways of the tribe should not pass into the hands of outsiders. Later, however, with time, the cousins' hearts did themselves lean sentimentally towards this practice, via the unseen paths of synchronicity. If it were not for the butterfly, would the caterpillar have any reason to exist? And so, Drininha and I would love each other, in our own eyes if not in everyone else's, that was my wish. Or — love's wish: though notwithstanding, of course. I kept myself to myself, for the time being, for I have my dignity. I insisted on as much, in that very same wonderful spirit of things. And she, she was soft and yielding, a sight to behold, and of a saintly innocence, Murillo could have painted her. Or was this sheer deception? Perhaps I should suspect her, in her wholesome ingenuousness, of some wild skittishness, some



hidden, smouldering capacity for argument and strife, bequeathed to her by the Pereiras de Andrade from up-country, of whom her mother, Aunt Denisaria, was one. But she was bound to love me *a priori*, she was predestined to! If as yet she concealed the fact, that must be on account of pride, you see if it wasn't. And that was where I was troubled by an unwelcome detail: more serious than the fact that she was Grandpapa Baron's granddaughter, didn't she just happen to be the daughter of Uncle Nestorionestor, she, Drininha, who was turning my head?

Now, however, we might perhaps be drawn closer and oftener together, under such emphatically extraordinary conditions, and ones that must be favourable to me: in the company of the Grim Reaper. In fact, hardly had I arrived from Rio, when I found out that she had also come, with Uncle Nestorionestor, from São Paulo, where Aunt Denisaria had auspiciously been obliged to remain. The bloom of youth in misty rain had coloured her eyes the deepest rainbow green, and her complexion the soft, sweet flesh-pink of peach-trees and little English girls at blossom-time. May Grandpapa Baron forgive me, when obituaries and tears of grief should reign uppermost, but I, I, I loved her, right down to the tiniest bone in her body; and the hour belonged to us. Naked and at peace, we were sailing the ocean of destiny. Hence, for me, the immediate usefulness of that death.

The point to the situation was this. Poor old Grandpapa Baron, hovering between this earth and oblivion, arrogantly acting out the starring role — still displaying the torso, the living bulk of his skeleton, but with his soul already disengaging itself from his body — and I, his grandson, with princely airs and a charter of privileges, artful, little less than scheming, brought, by dint of clever calculation, close to the opportune shadow of this demise, seeing in it

the means to be elevated into an improved, more agreeable state of courtship, I was keeping him close within my sights. Which, when put like that, sounds demeaning and repugnant. Yet it was neither cynical, outrageous nor insensitive; let me correct myself. If, exaggeration aside, I am so exposed and discredited, then this is all in aid of pious modesty, a third-party act of humility. Philosophising is nearly always liable to appear a cruel business.

I was thinking of Grandmama Olegaria — pure as the snows of yesteryear, and as its memories. For during those days the recollection of Grandmama Olegaria was revived in my mind, the illusions about her dispelled, she returned rejuvenated, and she must have borne some resemblance to her inimitable little granddaughter Drina. Petty pride and puckered brows were not going to prevent Grandpapa Baron being of service in his final moments to the simple welfare of two young people. And even the philosophers amongst us may sometimes take sides. If anything is of consequence, it is death. We die in order to prove that we were not right. Grandmama Olegaria was avenged.

The manservant Ratflea was standing fast at the door: on the inside, but in any case, at the door. He ignored me, you see if he didn't. I was much less able to ignore him in the same way. What can I tell you, what's to tell? Let us describe the sturdy individual thus: tennis shoes, of the kind known as angels' feet: legs bent and twisted, unevenly bowed outwards; by way of livery, tight-fitting trousers and a white, moth-eaten jacket, like some hospital orderly's tunic, buttoned up to the chin; his hair, something resembling a combed-out, greying frizz, a fungiform curly moss; and he was a medium mulatto. Otherwise, no distinguishing features, except for his squint eyes staring out from a bluish, hairless face — no false-looking hooter of a nose, no ruddy complexion, no white lead or flour.

Only those eyes that were never lowered in submission, and his face, aslant, upturned, that made it its imperturbable business never to stir itself into an expression, not even were it at the olympically supreme command of the wrathful gods. Everything we see is through a fundamental optical illusion, and no two ways about it. But rigid old Ratflea-Bugaboo, standing there on the threshold, in his already evening's or still morning's majesty, resembled the stuffed precursor to a type, a pseudo-symbol of sweet nothing, or a mould filled with emptiness, the stubborn scrap of a dolt in the void of space, the reverse of all that was right and true. There was something of the sentinel and the master of ceremonies about him, barely pedestrian, unequestrian; and there was a man who had never seen a statue! He took great care of himself but, I tell you, never knew himself in the slightest: he choked on his stupidity. His gloominess matched the palatial mansion's semi-façade — the one half of this house, which by some ludicrous act had been divided from the other half — with its windows that had been so intimidatingly blanked out. He must know and would keep to himself the paltry secrets of the fecund but fruitless couple — Grandpapa Baron, dying, and Grandmama Olegaria, deceased. What can I tell you, what's to tell? A succession of civilised centuries, human history echoing down the millennia, logarithms and stars, song-birds, dawns, sea-shells, Drina, the lovely, my Drina, and the world was also made up of the mystery that lay cocooned within a person of tin or lead, called Ratflea or Bugaboo. He allowed me to enter. He could not greet me with words, nor give me his tirade about how many chamberpots he had emptied and washed that morning. He, Ratflea, was dumb.

Not that I didn't smile, but neither did I press the point. Uncle Nestorionestor was arriving, too, I heard him clearing his throat and the sound of his steps right behind me; and I

had to picture Church Square cold and empty of anyone, all of a sudden. Just his furtive figure, straight as a ramrod, with his stiff, high-crowned hat, and his head well up over the high starched collar, duly clutching his walking stick — Uncle Nestorionestor — a character with a firm grasp on things. I stopped or hesitated or retreated or shrank back, and bowed — my conscience wondering whether I was to be reproached by him, for I was coming from the hotel, where I had hoped to meet dear cousin Drina alone. He walked past me, brushed past, puffing and snorting. He had glanced briefly at me. He uttered three quarrelsome words in my direction. He was returning from an arduous task which, bearing in mind his self-respecting ways, would have seemed incredible: he had just been, in person, to examine and peruse the two functioning cemeteries in the town.

A little way behind him, and somewhat disconsolately, came another, very different man. — *“That’s the way of things. That’s about it. Life has its sad side. Would you like a cigarette? Life...”* — addressing me courteously thus, panting in his cups, was Cicero M. Mamoens, the “Reveller”, also an uncle of mine. Life — what lies between those two dubious, swerving collisions: being born and dying? Uncle Reveller himself was amazed at what he had done. He had had to accompany Uncle Nestorionestor in the manner of a scout and squire, since the latter was not about to descend from his rank in order to carry out, alone, that inspection of the ever-so heterogeneous graveyards, and above all to venture into that of the paupers, the blacks and the destitute, at the end of the meadow — the Quimbondo cemetery.

Having by now crossed the threshold, Uncle Nestorionestor nevertheless turned about and took some three steps back. There was a definite look about his nose. He had surely forgotten something. But in actual fact, he

shot Ratflea a withering glance of disgust, no less, waving his walking stick at him. Without any slackening of the tension in his neck, his chin had risen three inches in the air. There was a man who should really have worn whiskers! Ratflea, standing there at his post out of no practical reason or honest necessity, had become a vision of effrontery to him. Uncle Reveller, this whole terrible time, had placed himself right before me, not knowing where to deposit his cigarette. And then, on account of Drina, I tell you, obedient to our radiant love, I commanded Bugaboo: to make himself scarce, disappear from the doorway and from our presence, pronto! Ratflea heard this — he was dumb, not deaf — and remained even more inflexible. He made a point of not blinking. His unstarling eyes presumably amounted to a dismissal of us: — “*Lords and masters, scoundrels, all of ye...*” — but the idea congealed like jelly. He assented by merely turning on his heel in soldierly fashion, meanwhile, and stormed off somewhere else, scuttled off inside, into another time from ours. Uncle Nestorionestor waited — two shakes, a sneeze, a scruple — out of dignity, even. Upon which, then, preceded by him, and in attendance, we definitively entered, Uncle Reveller and I, the majestic family mansion — the mere half of the same, do not forget — whose threshold no offence or unrebuffed insult was permitted to cross.

The antechamber or entrance-chamber opened into the dining-room and the reception-room and, moreover, in view of what was then about to happen, opening into it was the corridor, out of whose shadowy mouth one could imagine wafting towards us the breath, the very definition of the master's room, where the lion was no longer roaring. Grandpapa Baron, what a celebrity he was to himself! Our folk, gathered there, were awaiting the facts. Duly seated on the settees and dark, high-backed chairs lined up against

the wall, in two groups; they were separated according to sex, in keeping with that wise provincial custom, to which they appeared to be reverting at the behest of their surroundings.

It was a kind of communal pause that was being shared by those present. For the moment there could be nothing to talk about, as at some hearing where the proceedings were yet to be opened. Was every possible topic hanging upon an imminent future? For sure, my father must be there, and Uncle Nó, Uncle Pelopidas, Cousins Junhoberto, Jacques and Juca, as well as others more fortunately anonymous; and Aunt Amelia, Aunt Clotilde, Aunt Teresa, and Maricocas, Uncle Neoarquineias's wife, Aunt Sinhazinha de França, a false relative, Aunt Marmarina, Uncle Pelopidas's wife, Great-Aunt Panegirica, Cousins Renenén, Veratriz, Rita Rute, Marielsa and Etcetera, and my mother, whom the rest called Aunt Constança Gonçalves. I almost thought it something of a good thing that Drina was not yet there, as festive proof that she was there, waiting, in the future? And thus, premortally, was our progeny — the cast — growing ever more bored in this mere rehearsal for a wake. There must be people from outside, too, I don't know if there were. The hour was arranging everyone into Pereiras and Dandrades and Serapiaens.

Nor was there anything plausible to do to while away the time. Just look and gaze at the ten fingers on one's hands and the toes of one's shoes, or indiscreetly tell one's beads, as some of the women were doing, and take stock of the space before us. The room: excessively long, with overly heavy valances above the various curtainless doors and windows; and wall-lights dotted about, shaped especially, like the chandeliers, so as to resemble bronze coffee-bush sprigs; and bell-jars in cut-glass crystal, with inside each one a silver candlestick and its candle; and extraordinary

porcelain spittoons with flowers, like china from old Paris, which Ratflea must also look after, but into which none of us would ever spit again, slaves as we were to different, more modern habits; and the cross-stitched cushions, each one embroidered with a picture — depicting a madrigalesque scene, the art of courtly love, a young woman strumming a mandolin and her love-sick young man leaning over, listening, or vice or trice-versa — the sentimental sort, in other words, that one later misses. Drina, why, when she was coming, did she not?

But besides this, everyone's gaze converged on the two little marble, oval tables, at this end and that, just like islands in the vast expanse of the room: upon them, as if placed but forgotten, were some little silver boxes, and ornamental gemstones, quartz with almond-shaped protuberances and violet amethyst or green tourmaline veins hermetically sealed inside them. Great-Aunt Policena emerged from the corridor and Aunt Clotilde immediately stood up, making her way across. Only one or two people at a time took it in turns beside the dying man. It was like standing guard in some moderate fashion. The others went back to looking at the little marble tables at half-hourly intervals, at momentary intervals. They were doubtless feeling somewhat sad. If they had not been dozing, they might almost have stumbled across their own respective innermost depths. The grandfather clock, to-ing and fro-ing, was visibly swinging its clear-cut viscera, those of a perfectly formed being, the provider of a sound in suspension defining, not time, but symmetry. And: — "*He's still in a coma* ..." — I heard Aunt Teresa declare in a rather abstract tone to Uncle Reveller, who slowly drew closer to her, subdued and uncertain like the blackest of sheep. His epilogue having been approved by a medical committee, henceforward emancipated of all drugs, bloodlettings,

enemas, hip-baths and foot-baths, and purposefully prepared with the last rites — the only things which time did not permit being to make his confession and take the viaticum — Grandpapa Baron was departing once and precisely for all, in surrender to the final deep sleep, perhaps a little less absent from us now, and safe from all zbut himself, for he was by now in the realm of the unmoving soul. That gathering of ours was quite out of proportion, it was urgently ad hoc.

Upon entering, Uncle Nestornestorio had wandered about the place, not seeing fit to do anything, as if reducing all details to dust without lowering his eyes. He had greeted them. But in such a way as to let it be seen that he was making a point of keeping equidistant from both sexes and groups, unmingling. Until he saw Grandpapa Baron's big chair, empty, no less; and made his way over to it, more erect than ever, without bumping into anything. All he did, before occupying it, was to inspect the seat with due and proper caution; to him the whole external world, even that narrow reception-room of ours, must have looked beyond all hope in its dusty, adulterated state — where purple and mildew, trash and ash, should not lawfully be mixed up together. Uncle Nestorionestor, whom the world had refined, a man of class, nevertheless kept his cane in his hand and his hat on his head; who, though, would have found this peculiar or reprehensible, there where Grandpapa Baron had always let himself be seen, as was his due, in a hairnet and carrying a sceptre? He asked nothing, clenched his teeth in order not to speak and, taking his seat, squared himself up, as he always did when crossing his legs.

Everyone else pretended not to notice him, the most they did was to exchange glances, although they did have to settle each other down quickly and come to an understanding, just the way any little conspiracy was



hatched amongst these confederates. Upon which the coffee arrived, together with cups and a tray. And it was only then that Uncle Nestorionestor removed his hat, not without a certain petulance and haughtiness, laying his cane and hat on the writing desk, in a composed manner, as in a vignette — where all that was missing was the nonchalance of a pair of gloves. There are only simple explanations for the way things are managed, people are always running away from themselves. My Uncle Nestornestorio was confronting the rest of them, and I knew why. For no other reason had he gone, sending on ahead of him the Reveller, also my uncle, like a trespasser and his henchman, to inspect the two urban necropolises — that normally reserved for the respectable folk, those well laid to rest, called Our Lady of the Requiem, and that of the penniless paupers, the Quimbondo cemetery! A heated silence set in.

I was about to sit down in the dark-stained rocking-chair — we all know this, but let us insist on it, all the items of furniture there being comfortably dark — padded with straw in the seat and back, it was made, perhaps, out of a reddish wood; and I did not sit down. I had suddenly recalled something I had heard more than once, which was that there, in that very spot, almost at one end of the room, there had previously been two of those rocking-chairs, identical, matched up together as if in dialogue with each other: that of Grandpapa Baron and that of Grandmama Olegaria, master and mistress. After so many years, however, after what happened happened, one of them had disappeared. Could it be in the other half of the house?

This very ante-chamber, here, however long it might still pretend to be — and it oddly retained some hint of its original size, fifteen or sixteen yards in length — had one day been cut in two. One could run one's eyes along the wall, which was papered in alternating vertical stripes, in a

subtle criss-cross of blue and white scored lines, and occasionally a narrower gold frieze: but at the opposite end to the rocking-chair it came up short, closed off from top to bottom into the unfinished, whitewashed surface from which there was no return. That was a separation imposed from without, alien, seamlessly blocked off along the entire length, dividing the room in two — right from the front garden to the furthest end of the back yard. The lavish bedchamber in massive jacaranda had remained on the near side, and the tiled kitchen-scully had been left on the other side. All of a sudden, Drina, her absence, corresponded now to some obscure, confused desire of mine to keep her away somehow, you might fancy. From my family and my people. From myself, even, I can tell you now, with mental hindsight. Did I pass through that wall?

Grandpapa Baron, when a fully-fledged young man, had married the charming Grandmama Olegaria. And then came the vicissitudes of time. Grandpapa Baron, blinkered, wrapped up in himself, merciless — at the peak of his self-importance. Except that he had been struck unawares by some other current of energy, mean-spirited and prone to strife — the world and the flesh, no less? Grandpapa Baron loved Grandmama Olegaria, in his own haughty way: he commanded her to admire him, adore him, love him. Until, one day, Grandpapa Baron, the aggrieved grandee, had finally ended up demanding that mutual exile and rupture, which were to be forever. They separated, for no outstanding reason, not even some pardonable affair but rather, it would seem, on account of trifles and trivia. They walled themselves apart. Rendered themselves intransigent. Thenceforward, was there no special sadness, no sense of lack or tragedy about them? Life is deceptive, even when undeceiving. The two of them, neither hearing each other, nor seeing each other, and growing old in the due course of

time. Time, as irretrievable as a river; and as cold. So even now, were that house of ours and the universe not playing blind man's buff with us? With their mirrors all misted over, dulled with age. Only the frames were worth anything. All mirrors are padlocked. For there is no key to unlock and gaze upon our faces, these and others. I stood deliberately where I was, scratching away at an old sore. Drina — my love, our love! — it was on account of this that I was improving myself: I could, I would, I must move into a brand new state of being. And is that not what love is for? I pondered upon a patch of diamonds. But there, my Uncle Reveller had seated himself in the solitary rocking chair. Suddenly, compellingly, keenly, the need for humility was revealed to me.

Uncle Nestorionestor's silence interrupted everyone else's. But it was Uncle Nestornestorio himself who spoke. — *"I have arranged for Dr Gouvella to come, he may arrive at any moment..."* he declared, *dixit*, said and done. This was hard. And it took us by surprise; as the moment had now passed, it threw everything back into the realm of absurdity. A protophysician covering a vast region and famed far and wide, the said doctor resided in a distant town, in short. — *"I have sent a wire to Monsignor Xises, who will also be coming ..."* — he went on, with a now more appropriate pause. For the Monsignor, a renowned ornament of the clergy, a distinguished holy orator, a model of abundant and refined virtues, would be most fitting for the solemn obsequies, he, the Vicar-General of the Bishopric, no less.

But that was not all. Uncle Nestorionestor had, until now, merely been tentatively feeling his way about, testing the waters of his auditorium. That alone had been the reason for his rattling on, accordion-like. For the urgent topic, the nub of the matter, he had left to now, to the end, by way of

a final fanfare: — “*You should know that I, no less, have been to that foul and fearful place, where the rabble unload their dead, the people from the hovels and gutters... Do you have any notion of what that is? A dunghill — a field, that should be forbidden, of weeds, grass, rubbish and putrid bones... Those of our slaves!...*” He was pointing at us, one by one. “*Have you ever seen what is written there in deceitful, vile letters above the gate?...*” He stopped — with the clarity of a clock about to strike. Then: — “*This!: RETURN TO DUST, WRETCH, TO THE CLAY FROM WHICH GOD MADE YOU...*” He made a gesture by way of a challenge. And by now he had raised himself up to his full height. Stretched taut on his toes, it was as if he wished to restore the clan to some hitherto never achieved decorum. At which could be heard, chiefly from the group of women, a clamour of querulous voices and distressed and tremulous, if simultaneous and therefore somewhat unintelligible, protests. From one aunt, and the next, and the next:

“... *quite...*”

“... *right...*”

“... *despite!...*”

There would never be an end to the debate, it was an argument set to go on until nightfall. And Uncle Reveller, alone, rose unsteadily to his feet, no doubt obliged to bear witness along with Uncle Nestorionestor, in whose company he had recently undertaken all that graveyard-going. Except that, when it came to Uncle Reveller, no one would demean himself by gainsaying him or reprimanding him, and no one offered him a rejoinder. It was only observed that he thoughtlessly availed himself of a handsome spittoon in order to get rid of his poorly lighted cigarette.

However, my father, the eldest among those present, held the rest of them back with a wave of his arm. For the time had come to state the definitive response upon which

they had previously agreed; and, indeed, to turn against Uncle Nestor Nestorio that strength which was his weakness: the formalistic zeal of one who was very much the magistrate, the devotee of legality, of the niceties of procedure, replete from pronouncing so many sentences. Not so much irritated or annoyed, rather with something close to a child's mischievous glee about his bonhomie, my father nevertheless sat pedantically upright, in his turn: — *"His mind has already made its decision, his body is his own and, besides ordering as much in his will, he had earlier registered this desire expressly, in a lucid state and in full possession of his faculties, on a separate sheet of paper, having completed all the formalities. Our elderly and wise begetter, the de cujus, will lie in rest in the ample burial plot that he himself has arranged, in the modest cemetery... Let us speak no more about this!"* — he uttered, in a perfect parody of jurisprudence. He had made his wound. He had hit the mark.

Uncle Nestor Nestor, who had sat down again, winced and stood bolt upright, the oyster stung by a drop of lemon-juice or vinegar somewhere in the innermost substance of his being. He spread open his fingers, did he want to wash his hands? And what he uttered was not a reply, but a counterblast. He picked up his cane and his hat, donned the latter and brandished the former. — *"Nevertheless!..."* — he boomed, having pounded the floor with his stick: he had spoken. He was opening up the theory of disrespect again. He knit his brow into a frowning fortress.

The matter was quite back-to-front. Common knowledge, it was, that the unshakable, rancourageous Grandpapa Baron had taken his obdurate intransigence to the point of making it his intention to remain separated from Grandmama Olegaria even posthumously, putrefactually, epitafinally. That's to say: in the cemetery

— that place which is unity itself. Not for anything would he accept the abomination of being taken to the proper and honourable cemetery of Our Lady of the Requiem, with its inscription above the gate in Latin, saying: “*Beati mortui quia in Domino moriuntur...*”; where Grandmama Olegaria had been laid gently in her grave, with our filial regrets kindredly stated on the tombstone. Grandpapa Baron, then, using every channel, and to the eventual great amazement of all, far and wide, arranged to have his soon-to-be mortal remains conveyed to the Quimbondo cemetery, that of the common riff-raff, of abandoned waste-ground and shallow graves, except for one or two ugly-looking tombs, right by the gate — the saddest of their kind, with which those who are able to, semi-deify themselves in stone, in restless immobility, while the rest are laid on top of the earth, that devourer of human eyes and intestines. It was a formidable act of retaliation!

He, Grandpapa Baron, had never set foot in the Our Lady of the Requiem cemetery after the burial of Grandmama — during whose illness, death-throes, passing away, interment and month of mourning he had hurried off to his Rich Harvest Farm, where he held himself in abeyance. Some time later he went personally to choose and acquire a large piece of ground marked out at the furthest, unoccupied boundaries of the Quimbondo place. That was where he was to be conveyed, as sturdy as a piece of scrap-iron; and to have his own exclusive, sumptuous tomb erected, immorally so but nevertheless in solitary, sordid view. Uncle Nestorionestor, alone, was in revolt at this act of self-determination to which everyone else deferred, only he highmindedly offered resistance and measured the full weight of the matter, he would not be resigned to it. He opened his mouth as if pretending he could not speak. Or else, given where he was standing, he was the first to see

what followed, what suddenly happened next. Hurried footsteps, one or other of the aunts emerging from the corridor. — “*He has come round!...*” — she informed us. In a flash this piece of news had us Pharisees in a tangle, at a loss. The objective reality of it, that’s to say the cosmicomical nature of it, came at us all at once, in all its solidity. Was he now coming round, out of pure spite? Upon hearing the news we hurried along, while the doctors were called and the priest was summoned once again.

Grandpapa Baron’s chamber was, you might fancy, a chamber and a half. At whose door, nonetheless, we had to stop — as you will see — for a very natural reason and a matter, perhaps, of seconds. Just blocking the entrance was Ratflea, on his way out. With a certain affectation, holding it by the handle but with the help of his other hand, he was carrying a full chamberpot. We let him go on his way, dazed and squint-eyed, and it was worth it to see the grave pomp and lopsided aplomb with which he conveyed this sizeable, worthy prize: he was almost embracing it, as if it were his trophy, his highest honour. The chamberpot, incidentally, had a glittering, colourful and fantastic look about it, from Limoges or Delft, from over the moon, a most perplexing sight. Ratflea — who set off at a half-march down the far end of the corridor, where the sounds he made did not disappear — how was one to understand him, except as a sabbatical from nature, and an inescapable, triumphant paradox? Meanwhile we, and there were a good number of us, finally entered and managed to fit into that lair. A massive space with massive furniture.

Grandpapa Baron was indeed back, and by something close to a miracle, so heartily was he creaking and groaning there, wide awake and scowling. His head and face loomed out of the half-shadows, all bones — all chin, all cranium, all forehead and brows, all temples — all skull. But his

beard, which he no longer had, was still floating about there. Lolling back feverishly on the copious pillows, he stretched out those limbs of his in rigid ruination but, if he thrashed about, it was out of wilfulness and caprice while, bizarrely swelling in volume, he appeared to be asserting himself in all his earthly, ever-increasing bulk, a hulk of a body. The bed, goodness knows how, was still the same broad double-bed, unconjugal and chaste. In it, let me tell you, Grandpapa Baron struck me as omnipoetic — an oversized beast — and no two ways about it. Once again, in full view before him, in his tree-like presence, with evident, overbearing satisfaction, he had his family — his obedient servants. He had greeted us with something between irony and majesty, he would always be there with a whip behind his back: — “*Yes, how are you, gentleman? Ladies? Well?*” — with a toothless, but even so, a booming great voice; a way of speaking that was suited to concisely issuing vigorous, practical and awfully sensible orders, like the sort those Assyrian kings would send to their far-off sons, generals and administrators, by means of texts engraved and baked onto tablets.

As the one closest to him, my father was minded to say something or other to him, by way of welcome, or good wishes. Grandpapa Baron, however, let rip, blasting off in all directions, the veins standing out on his head. There might almost be smoke coming from those eyes of his. — “*Go deflower yourself!*” — he vituperated; the uncommonness of the expression and the malice of its spirit elevated the expletive to an aristocratic register. But Grandpapa Baron sensed and knew that he was on his way to the nonsensical nil-point where the circle is squared. Except that from that unspeakable certainty he took it as his right to play the villain and do villainous things, and he shoved his vulgarity down our throats until we choked. —



*"Ah, damnation! Oh, I'll be damned!"* — and he sat up, thrusting out his belly, majestically. Now he wanted them to bring him his hat, and to have his clothes laid out near him, ready to be worn, within reach of his claw-like hand. — *"Do you advise me to die? Well I shan't!..."* — and, now that he had his hat on, anything else could have been quite extravagantly reasonable. — *"Let the doctors come now! That's not all!... Find out whether there aren't any other, modern medicines, injections... I want a hot foot-bath!... There must be one..."* At the same time, and there was no avoiding it, one or other of the aunts had obediently to dress him in his scarlet waistcoat and his overcoat, quite extraordinary it was: that thing must have been a riding-coat. He laughed a deep-throated laugh of relish, and boasted: — *"About now, six hundred people, at least, must be speaking ill of me!..."*

He wouldn't even have anyone touch his hand, all jealous he was of his ruined, incapacitated, rust-ridden body. Was he delirious or not, was the question that might have been asked of him his whole life long; so badly twisted, he was irreparable. But the written evidence of this was effaced from the ramparts that had become a face. Was the little spirit left in him still being eaten up by the incurable tumour of pride? The cockerel himself knows nothing of the mysteries of his art; that is why he sings, and then goes off to be digested. What was he avoiding?

Ratflea then appeared again, watching everything squint-eyed. He had come to return the pisspot: the "master"; and forward he went, shuffle-shuffle. He jostled with the priest, who dodged aside, and came forward, too. Grandpapa Baron stopped them, however: — *"Wait! Perhaps I won't die... Let God decide!..."* — and any reprieve was long enough for him. But Ratflea, who was not thwarted by this, certain of those arrangements that must not be neglected, drew near

and placed the vessel on the bedside table. At one stroke he managed to defy an entire ritual, the present moment held no sway over him. I believe that we all looked at Ratflea-Bugaboo and his chamberpot with some envy: yes, indeed, to him Grandpapa Baron must be no more than a pygmy. What a family ours was! Looking for Uncle Nestorionestor, I turned around: and, next to him, holding him girlishly by the arm, I saw — Drininha.

She did not see me. She would not. She was in denial of me. Little by little I made my way out, retreating towards the door. She was not about to stare tenderly at me, straight in the eyes, just like that, in the midst of everyone else. She was a real little Pereira, a wild dawn-flower, one of those backlands Pereiras de Andrade, callow relatives of ours, whom we often scoffingly called Subpereiras; but who always served to provide us with votes, loans, steadfast friends, and sweet, green-eyed young farmer's brides, with long, erect bodies and necks that were so unmistakeably pretty. Very, very slowly, my eyes fixed upon her all the while, I took myself out of there. I wished she would want to, that she would consent to, that she would come, far away from everyone else, just to be with me, matching my affection, to be mine, all mine. My thoughts were back there, somewhere. If only I could entice her into the drawing-room — with all the fervent, burning, yearning longing in my soul?

I wandered about in the balmy peace and quiet. I felt as if I were miles away from the rest of the house, from Grandpapa Baron's bedchamber, quite troubled, in a cloud of confusion. The grand piano, over here, why had they kept it all silent and hidden away? The furniture, the pictures of flowers made out of coloured feathers — sprigs, garlands — bits of craftsmanship from out of the past. They spoke evocatively to me of Grandmama Olegaria, as did the

console-tables and cabinets, with their little antique cases and silver figurines, and opaline vases: even the two settles and the woven cane ensembles, so agreeably shabby for a drawing-room that aspired to palatial standing. If only Drina were to come now, right now, if only I could measure up to myself, if only she, the two of us. We would talk endlessly of Grandmama Olegaria, the memory of her transporting us into such a different state, of hours passed to the sound of lyres and zithers; and one can sing long and heartily of a grandmother if the time is one of conviviality.

But the large portrait of Grandpapa Baron caught sight of me from its lofty position on the wall, and thrust its gaze down upon me. Its eyes as hard as eggs. Yes, the unleashing of a gaze, of the devil unbound, of a hobgoblin, imparting its message with an aristocratic, you might say gruff-growling, air. I was startled, an outsider to the dynasty's titles of nobility and, carried away on conjecture, I nearly cried out, sounding out his name. And then I laughed to myself, somewhat falsely. I smiled. That portrait in oils, alone there, detached, I knew it to be the odd one of a pair. For to begin with, long before, there had been the other, matching one next to this, that of Grandmama Olegaria.

Before their definitive separation, when Grandpapa Baron and Grandmama Olegaria at least still tolerated each other, for many years here, in this very same, undivided house, they were not on speaking terms, such had been Grandpapa Baron's wish, tormented as he unceasingly was by some triviality, some trifling matter or other. He would never address Grandmama Olegaria in person, he ignored her, and they spent their lives in a silent, unspoken feud. When it became necessary, however, on account of an important matter or in order to take some urgent measure, he would carry out a grave, measured operation, putting into practice what was, perhaps, the most fanciful of his

solipsistic whirls. He would come into the drawing-room and stand, some distance away, but directly in front of Grandmama's portrait — at a time when she might be thereabouts, or having her called by the servants — and, speaking aloud, in an impersonal tone, he would spell out deliberately whatever it was: — "*The tenancy papers must be signed on the marked line with a cross, and left in the bureau drawer...*" Or: — "*Senhora Telles-e-Telles is not a suitable visitor...*" That was all. It was necessary, however, in some cases, for Grandmama Olegaria to give him a response; and in that event she would comply with the same procedure. Positioning herself in parallel to her great husband, and facing his portrait respectively and respectfully, she would pronounce her reply to him.

So, they did act out their parts in this roundabout exchange, by means of a triangulation or squaring of the dialogue thus personified. They became accustomed to as much. But for all that, it is nevertheless the case, to be sure, that Grandmama Olegaria did so almost mischievously, facetiously, pulling faces, ironically going through the motions. She would make a low bow, and add the vocative: — "*Baron, sir...*" — while pointing a diamond- adorned digit in the direction of his portrait, contradicting him with her left eye. She was said to have a graceful levity, a juggler's sense of balance; and it is for this that women are made, always the winners in such situations — by means of a smile, a manner, a sting or barb. Absolutely everything was bound to make Grandpapa even angrier; in order not to blow his top, he would button his lip and glower with a wolfish gleam in his eyes. That rage, that ricocheting indignation of his, did not touch Grandmama at all; they were the unbending oak and the supple reed, undisturbed by any gale. It is even said that, on one occasion, when she was suffering from laryngitis, and having applied herself

to that elegant impudence of answering back at the portrait by means of gestures alone, she wrote her repartee down, in her own fine hand, on a sheet of pink, scented writing-paper, which she went and hung on the picture-frame: — *“Baron, sir, I am most sorry, I have lost my voice, I am hoarse. But rest assured, the bedclothes at the Farm will bear the correct monogram...”*

Besides all that, Grandmama Olegaria had fine blue eyes, a perfectly formed little waist, and beautifully long legs, the narrowest of ankles, a mouth that exceeded all metaphors, as well as an altogether bright disposition, one meant for sensibilities of a different kind. Oh, for sure, Grandpapa Baron must also have suffered a while that wish yet inability to understand, all tied up in knots as he was, blind to most things, as he is even today, in his sallow old age. God leave him be. His solitary portrait troubles me now, in this place where the world stands on all sides, just so, like a street-corner with its lamppost. I shall take my blessing from him.

Yes, humility — as the supreme form of efficacy. Does only the humble man escape madness? I wandered to and fro, between the drawing-room, the corridor and the bedchamber; and my heart: a purring, yet not a cat in sight. Drina, she was bound to come to me by some sweet accident that never was, Drininha, the little princess, the fount of all manner of thoughts, a wee bit faithless as any hope must be. But, humility: like a stripping away, a lightening of things, the discovery of a different soul, gently bathing us and bearing away the grime, the flotsam and jetsam, every living moment. Uncle Nestornestorio, an image of solemnity — sooner or later I could not help but be reminded of his presence. He was the superintendent of soot, and no exaggeration. Drina, how I wished I could release her from that carbon-copy of a genealogical tree.

For I was minded to believe that one of the hidden objectives of life's idea is that our blood and spirit should correct those of our ancestors; yet those same ancestors had begotten and produced my as yet unattainable Drina, that flower of history. So then? Where did that leave us? — strictly philosophically speaking. There is no conclusion of the intellect that is appropriate, or that could stand up, or be valid.

And time, as banal as deception, true to itself — shifting and stirring. Drina was not coming, she would not be coming here, even though I was waiting for her foolishly, vainly, finding everything else devoid of taste, with a dryness like that of flour or hunger. I do not even know whether she was even a little fond of me, if the issue was one of maturity. But green grapes are the fox's prize.

— “*Drina!...*” — and I saw, I heard myself: stirred to emotion, easily pronouncing my words, I addressed a portrait of her that was not there, in the blank space on that unfortunate wall.

— “*Death may come at any time, one cannot be caught in one's pyjamas...*” — was what I must ponder, in some other meantime. We were keeping vigil, on the alert. For Grandpapa Baron's death, and no two ways about it. My bedroom window looked out onto our half of the rear yard, which was in a fearful state of abandon. Just as, beyond that wall which was far higher than the highest of walls, on the other side, Grandmama Olegaria's garden must also be in a state of abandon, dense and inaccessible, left to its roseless roses on long faded rosebushes, since she departed. Here and now, however, there were one or two trees, amongst which birds were flying about in the spring air, heading for the bushes, bedecked with flowers mimicking insects, butterfly patterns printed on their petals. Nearer to hand, the keen humility of the grass stretching out, and

apprehensive chickens pecking at the adamical earth. Well, blow me, who should I glimpse walking past down there, stooping lower than the lowest, but Ratflea?

You would only have to see him, to judge him; and you would be wrong. A kind of luckless imbecile, lesser even than the humblest servant, as dumb as a bridge and all its masonry, fulfilling his destiny as a hollow egg, containing nothing, nothing and yet more nothing, and stuck in the mud up to the price of his neck — he, it must be, for whom anyone whatsoever was to be envied, who must bemoan to the depths of his being that essential penury of his, and must wish he could vanish from existence, at one accursed stroke! Yet also living, but despising himself, always and at every moment. Then again, not. What he, in his own way, was doing was no small thing.

Even from taking charge of so many spittoons and chamberpots he seemed to find reason to hold himself, and that ludicrous occupation, in high esteem. How could he reconcile the emptying and washing of those foul receptacles with that very particular and glorious talent with which he credited himself? Given that it was said he had exercised that duty year in, year out, his entire life. Nor was this an inconsiderable labour, in such a populous mansion, in a mountain town with its cold nights, where the bathrooms were located so far down the ends of corridors that people were obliged to be lazier in their sleeping habits. Thus, none of the rooms lacked one or more of these night vessels, hidden in the bedside tables or merely stored beneath cots and beds — with their ample capaciousness, made not for giving, only receiving. And they ranged, according to the status of the apartments, from plain, enamelled iron ones, to big, solid ones made out of heavy, white foreign porcelain, glazed ceramic, as hard as steel, or the dull, smooth, quasi-marble effect of unfinished

pottery. Or, in the more luxurious bedchambers, the same material as those stunning, coloured porcelain or opaline items that could be found on display in the bathrooms: the basin, jug, soap dish, brush-holder, the gallipot of cream, the face-powder compact, the bud vase and beaker. Chamberpots are not, at least in theory, anyone's private property. Only that humiliating human necessity of ours called upon these obedient receptacles, each at its appointed hour, to be filled with commodious and gushing regularity.

Early in the day, however, Ratflea-Bugaboo would come diligently along with the fine dawn rays, and slip into those inner recesses in order to collect them. He would take them away, one at a time, with a certain pomp, as if he were conveying something of serious value, of bountiful estimation. He would go and wash them at the tub in the back yard. Ratflea, Bugaboo, was mute, and inveterately so, he pulled no faces nor did he make any effort by way of a reply, spurning the standard dumb-show. For that very reason there were some who believed him to be quite hale and hearty, and merely a faker, as it happened, acting out of wiliness or guile. There could equally be some other uncertainty, some deeper disorder, don't you know, such that — and the truth did later become known — there was some sort of burden hampering him in the infinite workings, in the regime governing his hidebound spirit. Ratflea, the Bugaboo, thought highly of himself. He had invented a stature for himself, resting upon a presumption of arrogance. And he despised everyone else, every god-fearing one of us. He would make his way over to the tub, where there were chamberpots awaiting him, ready to be rinsed. Even mine, the pisspot from this noble room of mine: a fine, pink urinal, painted with a delightful group of cherubs, with sprigs of flowers in a more vivid pink, in relief, with delicate veins, and a finely worked handle on the lid — as capacious



as a soup tureen. On this occasion, and the sun was not strong in the town on this cold June day, he was wearing a hat — that's to say, a threadbare beret or cap — it being the hat that makes the man. I was feeling less anxious now. Amusing to go and see him, and the pisspots, out of curiosity. Go down into the yard.

There was no time even to ponder the matter. On account of the suddenness with which we were called to Grandpapa Baron's bedchamber, as if his first hour as a deceased man were already here. — "*There are many people there for his final throes... Cigarette?*" — Uncle Reveller informed me, seeking me out by way of a certain clumsy sympathy. And yet, things were otherwise: for Uncle Reveller almost never managed to hit upon the immediate fact of the matter. Grandpapa Baron was summoning us vassals in order that we might still prostrate ourselves before him. Having made his confession, unburdened, he meant to give us, while keeping us under his watchful eye — and very much the Pharaoh, he was — what might possibly be his final farewell. But he was sure of himself, of his rock-like eminence, still high-spirited, still the performer, betraying little of the dying man other than the grey rings under his eyes, which intensified by the minute and, with the same onward-marching, abominable urgency, an ever-increasing gauntness about the nose, that was rapidly turning pale, ultra-waxen, almost gleaming. This was a moment of distinction, of all-embracing pomp and circumstance. Discreetly towards the back, but nonetheless in front of the doctors, one could see the priest standing vigilantly, and they must have sent especially — although it remained as yet still hidden, out of decency — for the holy candle, as meant for the deceased. I drew surreptitiously closer to Drina — the nape of her neck, downy like a young chicken's, fair, fresh, stunningly beautiful, had the scent of

popcorn and lemon-groves. Close by, inevitably, was none other than the immutable Uncle Nestor Nestorio. My father and mother in the first row, too, that is, on the other, enormous flank of that extravagant bed. There and then a universal history was unfolding — and what about my relatives, who could have convinced them of this? Only Socrates. Grandpapa Baron was scrutinising us: with eyes that, while not short of oil, were running out of wick.

I guessed what he was not about to say, when he frowned: and a fly approached that lustrous brow, but darted straight away again. He was forceful, curt, despite the coughing and spluttering, with a steady inflection to his voice: — “*If I die... Be advised! You must bury me as I have determined, as you well know...*” — such were his peremptory words. He laughed, clenching his non-existent teeth. His face still retained the vestiges of child-like grimaces. It was as if he were always viewed from a distance and, even then, only through, and through again, a succession of spyglasses. He had only decided officially to accept this final state of affairs for the malicious satisfaction of inflicting this joke upon Grandmama Olegaria and ourselves.

Was this how the others understood him? One who did not was Uncle Nestor Nestor, stiffening his neck and raising his chin even higher when his collar squeezed him tight. — “*The aforementioned cemetery, my Father, sir, is...*” he said, or meant to, before he stopped short. Grandpapa Baron’s shoulders shot up with a jolt — “*Go deflower yourself!*” — he bellowed, like a bolt of lightning; uttered in this manner, untarnished, the impossible imperative could not have been more fittingly delivered, even with the ladies present. Uncle Nestor Nestor croaked: — “*H’h... H’hm...*” it was not a grumble, he was clearing his throat; that was his reply. He was obliged thereafter to

stare into the imaginary space before him. Grandpapa Baron was simmering away, turning to cream. He smiled, he was going to die, others were going to live, in another interlude, you might fancy, he was leaving no insult unrebuffed, no affront or offence. Except that the phlegm in his throat was now, in its own turn, working itself up inside him into a stubborn grunt. It might be the beginning of his actual farewell.

He had also, with this in mind, kept his hat on. So as to be able to touch the rim with two fingers, in acknowledgement of the men, and to take it off entirely to the ladies, in an all-embracing gesture. Why did he address each one of us in such a derisory, detached fashion? Somewhere and yet nowhere about. — *A cloud, that's right, but one that hides no sun?* — I thought, I mean, I simply could not help thinking.

Howsoever and by whatever final, unpardonable motive — as I had been informed — Grandpapa Baron brought about that total breach in relations, after which Grandmama Olegaria and he lived in half-houses, far and away on either side of each other, as neighbourly as could be, forever. Already, before this — on account of some nonsense or trivia — they had not been on speaking terms, except, occasionally, as acted out in the aforementioned manner, obliquely and crosswise, by means of the scene in front of the portraits. One day, however, when Grandpapa Baron had had her called to the drawing-room for that purpose, Grandmama Olegaria could not come immediately, keeping him waiting a few minutes longer, enough for him to feel mortally insulted, in his irascible pride. And why had Grandmama Olegaria not been able to come right away? Not out of spite, nor contempt, but merely because, at that very moment, she was having to attend to her most pressing bodily needs.

Grandpapa Baron recognised no exemptions nor did he accept annulments, preferring instead to go on dwelling on the matter. He was not one to let blame pass, he would not allow Grandmama Olegaria any means to satisfy the insult. And so he impaled himself on his own spike. The partition-wall had been raised. Even now, in that scoffing way of his, Grandpapa Baron took his leave by demeaning us. Only, however, because we knew him to be mortal and standing there in the jaws of death did we endure him — that much was also true. Only death could match up to a signed pardon, that was as clear as fire to me. When my turn came, I bowed in response to Grandpapa Baron's touch of his hat, and looked at him future-wise, I did not want to judge him. But, not because of what he did, but because of what he was, he made it hard for me to have my humility.

Oh, I always wanted to be humble, but never could, something even more rarefied than the air we breathe prevented me; something deep within me, no less. That something which is fluid, that we all secrete, spreading it out and extending it beneath the subtle, all-encompassing roller that is the world. Grandpapa Baron hardly let out a groan, his face barely went into spasm, some pain or distress, that's all, had finally him caught on its hook. There were further groans, which he stifled. Oh, to be humble — so that I might break out of the hypnotic spell cast by the strange, eye-less demon of life. But — and even Ratflea, who had appeared at the door, received his wee little wave of greeting — Grandpapa Baron went all the way with that high-flown burlesque of a farewell, which was as long as a text without a subject.

I was quite startled by what he appeared to be — the inescapable mountain. I grasped Drina's hand. Obstupefied by now, we were all applying ourselves to the task of not seeing and not hearing how death — not the moment of

death — is always fresh and new. I was squeezing Drina's hand, but I trust she might not have been entirely certain of that. Grandpapa Baron declared: — "*I... I... I...*" — and nothing more. He must have all his demons beneath the bed. What was it — what burden or mouldering relic — was he unable to rid himself of? If he were not to manage it, by that final, ordained moment, he would miss the mark, perhaps definitively, he would be ruined: as if unable to get back into orbit again. And how was one to avoid being a hindrance to him? How could one help him? Unless the crocodile could of itself become uncrocodiled... In his own sorry way, he did manage it. For one genuine moment he smiled a lesser smile. He unshortened his face. So as to gaze marvellously upward, yes sir: a gaze — serene as well as true as well as righteous — that was radiant. Calm, settled in its effect. But the genuine moment was only that, no more. The great thing had befallen him. He was now beginning to turn purple. As if there were ten of him, he collapsed.

— "*He has said enough is enough...*" — Uncle Reveller murmured to me, without offering me a cigarette; and this time he was right. Grandpapa Baron was no longer there — take note, for future reference. He had gone back inside, just as in the morning the stars are poetically said to be snuffed out — a *factum fatuum* — and not like a blackboard wiped clean with a sponge. Except that there was still the calculated contrariness of nature; that's to say, on this transient earth of ours, another lingering illusion was undone. But by this time he was no longer in the company of Pluto. He was a tough man. The first sigh he uttered was his dying one. He died with his boots on. And returned to dust.

At that the place was taken over by the buzzing commotion of our hustle and bustle, our prayers and

exclamations, as the candle was lit. We were all a murmuring whisper. In each one of us a merest, slightest soupçon of vengeance was making itself felt — hardly even deserving of reproof. In our shame, though unawares, we wept. The farewell hat had rolled onto the floor, I was inadvertently about to tread on it. Grandpapa Baron... fine man ... no, our great man!

Then, just as I am telling you here, I found myself with Drininha in the yard, under cousin Drina's sky, in her air, with flowers everywhere, whisked naturally away from the superficial — funereal and lugubrious — aspects of death. Had I followed her or dragged her out there — bursting with intentions — through the air, through the wafting scent, through the butterflies themselves? I wanted more than her light little hand upon mine; I wanted it at least to be trembling. Sheer deception, no less. For just then, she stopped. And the struggle that went on between us did so independently of the sentences we uttered:

— “... ..” — her chin struck the air and she shrugged her shoulders emphatically, hanging her little head slightly.

— “... ..” — and she put her hands on her waist, contrarily, how I loved the way she deliberately, tightly closed her mouth. Moreover, I thrust my shoulders forward, for I had to enhance the proportions of my body in such a way. Close by us, coo, coo, coo, with an equally swollen heart, a little bird was singing for the hell of it.

— “... ..” — she stuck out her bottom lip, and refused to look me in the face; a deep flush rose to her cheeks, joining the vigour of her eyebrows and eyes. The bird beat its wings, flip-flap. As solemn as if I were raising the host aloft, I wished for nothing more than to abandon all pretence.

We did not look at each other. Drina disengaged herself from my affections, she simply slipped gracefully away,

all at once, and was gone. And I felt almost happy, for she promised so little. What might she actually wish for, some day, that she would not be capable of? I would wait for the day after the next, and there you are. But when it came to taking measures, the town was not backward in coming forward: the bells of the Carmo and Sacred Heart churches had begun to sound, profoundly proclaiming their news. Even the very ground we stood on was Drina's, as far as I was concerned. Let us go on portraying this world as it ought to be, before it is no more.

But the fact is that, as the tolling of the bells got under way, I can tell you that Ratflea-Bugaboo had also appeared, bearing before him a pisspot, the last one. It was Grandpapa Baron's. I looked at it carefully: a sumptuous and strange-looking vessel. Ratflea had stopped, a gloom fell upon him, and was then dispelled again; his faced turned sour, as if he had to scratch himself but would not deign to do so. Was I going to shrink away from the sight of that sensational receptacle? I wished to see it, emphatically, and I commanded him, that self-important, morose, workaday servant and despatcher of orders. At that, insolently, bristling with contempt, he responded impudently, nearly wiggling his ears. His dumbness served him like armour plating. And the chamberpot, which he had raised unnecessarily close to the level of my nose, filled me with awe!

It was huge, blue on the outside, light blue, but decorated with flowers — roses, tulips, little yellow and red flowers — all rather *Vieux Paris*, and a frieze to finish off the rim, a gold stripe. Inside, on the base, there was also a garland of flowers. But in the middle, oh, painted in the middle of the base... an eye! A human eye, a blue eye, sprung on you just like that, in a wide-open expression of astonishment... Ratflea, the Bugaboo, he now stood there waiting for my

disgusted stupefaction never to end. An eye that seemed alive, more alive than a person's, was suffering cynically there, impotent, a prisoner.

To think that Grandpapa Baron had secretly, over the years, made his cruel tormentor's use of that object! An object that had come from abroad, from Europe, but whose workmanship was in such hideously bad taste, one could only interpret it as a humorous item meant for jokers. The centre of its bulging belly must have been the source of hearty laughter thousands upon thousands of times over! The ironic, ornamental pisspot hovered before me, unbridled, a kaleidoscope of colour. I pushed it away.

But still Ratflea held on to it; his whole dumb face a picture of malevolent disdain. (The inopportune sound of familiar footsteps told me that someone else in the vicinity had preferred to withdraw from the family's temporary display of mourning, having likewise discovered the secluded peace here in the yard. Uncle Nestornestorio.) Ratflea moved away. My impulse was to hurl that object against the concrete side of the tub, to smash the monstrous, cyclopean great pisspot to bits. But Ratflea was zealously guarding it. Doing as he had been told, doubtless merely fulfilling longstanding orders. Vengeful, barely wounded in his disproportionate sense of self-importance, had Grandpapa Baron ultimately, then, been powerless in the face of existing humanity, which he set against himself or loathed? — despotic in the extreme was Grandpapa Baron, a King Herod, a man whose piss ran cold. (There was an air of urgency about Uncle Nestorionestor, he wished for profitable meditation, and was walking to and fro, raw-boned and excitable, he had witnessed the scene. All cloaked in black, his large black tie cancelled itself out. He was fingering his cane, as if galvanised by it. And, much to the point, I am reminded that he had donned his hat.) Now I



had some little understanding of Grandpapa Baron, a very peculiar man, as we all are. He had drawn breath, grown, and been born. He had countless dark sides.

Uncle Nestorionestor was watching Ratflea.

From a distance, Drina was watching us.

At which I noticed how quickly walls grow old, on account of the damp and the moss, on account of regretful longing. A wall that did not separate us from Grandmama Olegaria's invisible garden, from which I seemed to hear the cries of other little birds that were Drina's. The longer I listened, the more my sense of conviction fell away. Which produced, in my very innermost being, a silence, a lessening of weight. The microbe is humble, as is the creeping virus, the dust, the bread, the globule of blood, the sperm, the endless future inside the little seed, the vindictive soil, the lowliest water: the atom is humble; God is humble. Not ever, here, will they teach me this thing that is nevermore. And I wish I could return to some gentle retreat, lost and all-embracing: loving. If I smiled, it was the whole world in unison with my current state of being.

However, what sprang to mind and absorbed me in the recollection of it was a fact — so concise and vivid that it could become an anecdote — but which happened in such a way as never to be forgotten. And to which my family's people did not find it pleasant to refer; even though it was repeated liberally, as a memorable and witty tale, by everyone in the town.

For it was the case that Grandpapa Baron, many, many years after his domestic separation from Grandmama Olegaria, and never having had any occasion to see her during that whole time, happened to be standing at the window with some other person when he glimpsed a lady in the Square, wearing crinoline and a light jacket with her hair gathered up on top — dapper, lively, elegant —

devilishly beautiful. His eyes lingering on her, Grandpapa Baron praised her demeanour and charm. At which the other person remarked to him in surprise: — “*But, Baron, my lord... it is none other than your lady wife...*” And he, quite untroubled, showing no upset in his face nor holding back his words, remarked seriously, simply, honestly: — “*She is well preserved, the lady Baroness...*”

What, however, if this were merely a fictitious indifference, and he, Grandpapa Baron, were hiding away from some sentiment that was obstinately writhing about inside him? There might always be something beneath the ashes — embers or a baked potato. And life is one’s own private rehearsal. I felt pity for Grandmama Olegaria and Grandpapa Baron, for that time when the imparting of love stirred them in their disarticulated way, and they were still being thrown into confusion by the vagaries of the day. But we should all thank Grandmama Olegaria for the gift of ageing without losing her grace. Had Grandpapa Baron loved her, in his own manner, in his way, up to the end? — I wondered, plagued by doubts. The purpose, that which is the inevitable design, of life, comes and goes, running rings about us. Life — always dripping onto hard rock. I aimlessly spat in all the spittoons, there in the room where I was. Only then, out of habit and in the quiet, did the figure of Ratflea-Bugaboo, our queer little scoundrel, loom large in my mind.

Someone sniffed. It was Uncle Nestorionestor, who was trying to conclude a message to São Paulo, to Aunt Denisaria, by the straightforward means of a telegram, and saw me with displeasure, inconveniently standing there. Could I nonetheless not help him in some matter? — I asked, thereby kissing the stone in place of the saint. Was he, harsh man, not the very embodiment of Drina’s virtuous father? That inescapable idea was bound to touch me a little. Uncle

Nestornestorio, somewhat reticently, replied in no uncertain terms that I could not. Contemptuous not of me, but of the human race and the evil inherent in it, he raised his chin a little higher, towering above me. With his eyes, meanwhile, he was categorical, Uncle Nestorionestor always had a great non-existent mirror before him — or behind him. His jacket, his collar, his eyelids, his frowning brow overlapped one another and slotted together again, as if they were actually the vestiges of some extinct armour casing. Since nothing about his scaly exterior would be renewed, nothing could germinate, either, on the inside, in the brain, the soul. If he had been a tree, he would have had thorns right down to the roots. He was. That is, he amounted to nothing more than a frustrated attempt at a monument to himself.

I made as if to withdraw, but in fact never letting him out of my sight for the slightest moment, for it was my intention to follow him. Drina rewarded me with a nearly complicitous look, as she saw me being obliging towards her father, with something bordering respect; and what would I not stoop to, in order to ingratiate myself with her? Uncle Nestornestorio himself, however, standing thereabouts, aroused in me now a sober, commiserating sympathy: his melancholy but solid person impressed itself upon me. For I had sensed that he would not normally have made quite such a monstrous figure as this. But he was for the moment blowing in the wind, at odds with life. And, above the gate of the Quimbondo cemetery, the ringing echo of a phrase was gnawing away at his centuries-old eyes, demolishing him, turning his overbearing vainglory back into dust and clay — parading our dubious origins before him. “*RETURN TO DUST, WRETCH, TO THE CLAY FROM WHICH GOD MADE YOU! ...*” Plain and definitive, cruelly so — *Back you come, scoundrel!...* — was the dictum and the evil spell, the pity of that meaning,

that could be read there, too, between the lines.

On account of which Uncle Nestorionestor was wandering the anguished empty spaces of the house, at once grave and engrossed. He accepted people's condolences and respects, but as his spirit was urgently grinding away he had no notion of where he was. — "Return to dust..." — wretch, was what he was battling against, with his ventriloquial way of thinking, with dazzling despair. To thwart that despicable decision! This alone he believed to be his duty, he was staking his pride on it, he considered it a dispute of honour.

The bells tolled out at infrequent intervals.

— "*No one's paying any attention to Papa... The others don't understand him...*" — Drina said to me becomingly, in the briefest of words. What can I tell you, what's to tell? Her words entered my soul, to me her voice sounded sweet and true. Drininha had sat down, better than anyone could have done, on Grandpapa Baron's big chair, she sat on it without lowering the arm. Her chic little feet rested on the ledge, and I sat by her side. — "*Do you ... ?*" and she was waiting for a little help from me, she was not smiling, but looked doubtful. — "*Isn't there a way?*" — she pondered. Extremely subtly this time, ratifying each and every absurdity, denying what must be mistaken. The bronze electric wall-lights were turned on, and the candles in the bell-jars snuffed out. What can I tell you, what's to tell? Drininha with her back to the window and the Square. — "*There has to be a way!...*" — she said, more between her teeth. It sounded a lot like a lead-up to something, and like heartfelt advice.

The house with its walls blacked out now, covered in black drapes. In the part of it open to view it was welcoming in the townspeople, those of note, who had come for the wake. They wandered about the drawing-room and the

reception-room, they filled the front garden, the whole night was to be taken up with it. The common folk, even on the benches in the Square, even into the early hours, out in the open, no less. This deceased fellow here was a prosperous man, the funeral promised all kinds of revelry and commotion. More relatives kept on arriving, distant relations, hangers-on and in-laws, and those more or less distantly in the family's service. The inauspicious news was conveyed by telegraph even to the remotest of the Dandrades Subpereiras, Drina's people, in the furthestmost backlands.

Drina had accompanied me almost as far as my bedroom door. — "*There has to be a way!...*" — and she shook her strong, smooth golden hair, which had come half undone. Uncle Nestornestorio, clutching his hat and cane, had locked himself in Grandpapa Baron's study. Perhaps, incensed by his cause, he was preparing some speech. Maybe if he were to speak at the graveside, yelling out his irrefutable arguments would transform the facts there and then: it would resound more powerfully and loudly than the threatening little ditty that was forever inscribed on the gateway to that Quimbondo cemetery. — "*No one understands him...*"

Quite. Set against Uncle Nestorionestor, from some way off, was an intense inertia of faces, wearisome countenances. The general air they wore, each and every one, was unshakably the family's repudiation of him. — "*His final will is law...*" — not even would there be a spokesman to answer him. And he agreed unquestioningly, don't you know, there was no refuting it. What he controversially had to say was what could not be brought into question. That Grandpapa Baron had not been sound of mind, that was something not even he would admit. Uncle Nestornestorio was enduring danger and torment, in tune with the grandfather clock. He had to outwit them all, and

there was an end to it. Was he losing all control of himself? — “*Return to dust...*” — it was there to be read at every moment, in a fresh coat of paint, on the walls where the wake was being held, in the pictures with their flowers made of feathers, in the coloured lumps of crystal, in the little oval-shaped marble tables. Was his vainglorious self fraudulently stiffening its resolve in order to ward off the manifold forms assumed by death? Honest to God. He refused the shambles of it all, refused to show himself, he would not demean his clan. — “*His final will is law...*” — nonsense, pettifoggery, trivia, trumpery.

Dawn was breaking — the cock-crow utterly unfurling itself — in the round all around. There is no dust of ages. But my Uncle Nestorionestor knew nothing of that, for the range of his thoughts was severely restricted. — “*Return to dust!...*” — thrown in his face again. Conspicuously, stiffly, having just emerged from the study, he set out ahead of himself, off to face Hannibal or Xerxes, to everyone’s distress. Drina followed him anxiously. Was he going to leave the house? There, though, at the door, was Ratflea — certain in his mind, categorical, as ugly as an apophthegm.

He, too, had found the means by which to get himself clad in black, all sails to the wind. The only disruption to his mourning dress was his inordinately long tennis-shoes. He impressed himself on us, moreover, in the puffed up coherence with which he seemed to be acting out a part. He was taking notice of everything, the bow-legged, cross-eyed arch-attendant of the devil.

The incident was a sudden one. Was Drina speaking with Ratflea? His leathery forehead had turned to gooseflesh, but out of wonderment, for sure, at the mention of something good — a word of flattery, a crumb or morsel, a tip. Drina was talking to him. Ratflea flared his nostrils, he’d snorted inwardly, he half-closed his eyes, twisting his

face down one side. Drina was speaking. Was Ratflea — smiling? It was actually only then that he scratched his fuzz: mouldy old fungus. Drina talking. Now Ratflea was standing his ground at the door, his hand on the knob. No one would have dared forbid him from doing so, so essential did he seem — barely standing on his asymmetrical-parenthetical legs — the worst part of the architecture.

Drina was whispering to me, beside the closed, silent piano. — “*Obey a decrepit old maniac? May God keep him in Heaven and grant me forgiveness...*” — her eyes worked their charm on me, just at the right moment.

Affrontery. Drina, with that now-and-then way of hers, captivated me and set me free. And why not have the half-house, the other one, Grandmama Olegaria’s, opened up now, once and for all and everlastingly? It had remained entirely closed since she had died, but I could remember all its details, with a degree of likeness that was refreshing, comforting, longing.

— “*Who are you with? Which side are you on?!*”

Well might one hesitate. Fancy that. On Grandmama Olegaria’s and Grandpapa Baron’s side, good versus good, the way they both faced each other once upon a time.

— “*I’m with you, Drininha...*”

— “*With Papa?*”

There I was. Just so, it was curious how Grandmama Olegaria, finding herself alone in her turn, had hastened to modernise the furniture and the house throughout. While she herself had always remained a kind of gay, purposefully, intelligently old-fashioned young girl. The foremost lady of all, beyond any desire to know of the changes that were happening in this world, she lived the present delightfully in the past. Grandpapa Baron’s overdone, twisted ego had never held any sway over her, no how, it could never reach that gliding grace of hers — she whose heart lay in a yes, in

a garden.

— *“With your father, Drininha...”*

Certain, though, that I was throwing myself at the mercy of all manner of intemperance and inclemency. Drina was smiling at me. With hours ahead of us. Behind us, now. The sun was shining wherever it wished. The height of morning.

Truly unburdening himself now, Uncle Nestorionestor lightly rubbed his hands together, his hat hanging on the cane between his knees, a little less cross, perhaps. He would not let that arrogant pride, those peaks of distinction, that fearless concentration which were vested in our name, come crashing down: everything that demanded to be hung on a coat-of-arms and was stamped, emblazoned thunderously across our strife-stricken chest. He was the true, the genuine, the fruitful successor to Grandpapa Baron, embodying entirely that signal, sullen self-conceit. More so than my honourable father, than kindly Uncle Pelopidas, than ineloquent Uncle Noé: or Aunt Carla, the refined one, Aunt Cló, the obese one, Aunt Lu, the one who was always pregnant. Aunt Té, the pretty one. Much, much more so than my mere self, for example, Leoncio Nestorzinho Aquidaban Pereira Serapiaens Dandrade, who was already ageing a little, I should say, without further pause.

— *“Let’s always stay together with Papa!”*

— *“Yes, yes, yes, Drina...”*

It was time for the funeral, hailed by the dawning of the day. Grandiose, well met, his grace the Bishop recited the prayers for the deceased, in the ancient reception-room. At which, on the dot, the half-house came alive; notwithstanding its windows painted so black, by way of some spurious grief and prior irony. The great bells tolling, craftily, mournfully. I, close to Drina. And so, with everything arranged for maximum show, all pumped up



pomp, in the Square the musical band played funereal melodies. Even Uncle Nestorionestor took a handle of the coffin, in his outdoor garb. Drina and I, together in our relief, breathed one breath, one feeling. A funeral is the algebraic procession of doubts. It would be led on its way by the hand. The solidarity of one and all was inevitable.

— *"You're a decent fellow, you're our friend..."* — Drina told me by way of compensation. While Uncle Nestorionestor helped carry the coffin, I had offered, happy to ingratiate myself in this way, to carry his effects. I clung to that hat as if to a helmet from another age or realm; as for the cane, it was a pleasure to hold in my hand. As we set off we were moved to compunction. That crowd was ours, an eruption of humanity. Moving backwards now, they all slowly shuffled their pious heels.

— "Has he accepted it? Do you think so?" — Drina asked of me, dignified, fragrant, milk-white. More beautiful in black, in silk. — "Of course, of course!" — I lied, or did not lie. I walked on in very pedestrian fashion. We were making our endless way downwards, for the Rua Direita was on the side of a hill. Vying in their lamentation were the bells, dream-like, and the ineffable sound of the musical band. Uncle Nestorionestor must be experiencing the most painful realisation. No longer bearing the coffin, he had retrieved his belongings from me. Ingloriously.

— *You are my friend. You're a good person!"* — cooed Drininha softly, but clearly. We struck out towards the meadow, half halting and backtracking. It was light. The sun, indifferent. We passed by the churches of the Rosary, Trinity and Saint Anthony beneath the sounds of other bells. All so slowly that Drina seemed to be mine, and I felt pity for Grandpapa Baron. All so much music. Regretful of Grandmama Olegaria, whom, whose tomb, we were leaving further and further behind. Solemnly, in a cortege, we made

our way to that place of opprobrium — under the gaze of Uncle Nestor Nestorio. Could it be that we were all of that stripe, that ilk, a lot of Dandrades, Pereiras, Serapiaens?

And now we were steering in that direction, one could make out the Quimbondo cemetery. The gate, in the battered wall. The name-plate. At the last glimpse of it we hesitated. In they went in close succession, coffin and crowd, pall-bearers, torch-bearers. My father and mother just so, and uncles and aunts, one after the other. Even the leisurely, talkative, clever-dick Reveller, who was well familiar with the place. Was the aberration about to be consummated? Well, no. Uncle Nestor Nestorio had stopped. He had the look of what he had become, wearing another face upon that face. One could see the way he carried his head, his nose, so aquiline. There was a tremendous trembling about him. He was trying to turn himself into stone. Demiurgent barbs flashed from him, from this overbearing eminence.

— “*Let’s stay behind, too!*” — commanded Drina, with a certain subpereira-esque ring in her voice. And so we did. It was midday and would always be. We made a sunshade of a tree. A cow and some donkeys and horses, some oxen, here and there, were grazing on the level ground of the meadow. Apart from the odd curious wretch, there was no one else about. We were alone there, the three of us, a few steps away from the gate. Uncle Nestor Nestorio was pondering: — “*Return to dust...*” — he muttered to himself, pettifoggingly. He allowed Drina to take his arm, by way of support. Was Drina, however, expecting something, someone or something? — some great ruse, some convoluted plot, some dreamed-up scheme. Drina was steady and calm.

When suddenly!

Take heart, but who was that, running crazily along, dressed in black, with a yellow waistcoat, feet in white,

carrying a vessel of some sort under his arm and at the same time brandishing a brush? Ratflea the Bugaboo, as swift as could be, with his legs like pliers. Was that a chamberpot he had on his head? No. It was Grandpapa Baron's hat — sitting there askew. Looking for all the world like he was under someone's orders — Ratflea — a rough outline, approaching, glimpsed, seen, then gone. Drina smiled, as did I, nervously. It was the vessel that was the pisspot! That huge great, light blue pisspot, but exquisitely decorated with flowers... and the open eye-of-understanding — on the base! A chamberpot full as could be with blood — that's to say — filled only with red paint, out of a tin...

Having reached the gate, Ratflea was busying himself: he began to daub over the inscription, that legend which was so much tarnish. With great brushstrokes he painted it over and out. Splashing good, bloody paint all about, spattering himself and spraying it everywhere — he finished. He had blotted it out. It was extinguished! And he shot up in stature. He grew a good few inches. A grisly look of triumph on his face, his feat had given him wings. He had done his part. He wanted to speak, he was bursting to. He did! A high-spirited drunkard's diction, rapping out over the tough tips of his teeth, a voice like stone weighing on the soul. He spoke: — “*I... I... I...*” — like barking. In a state of stupor, upsides with his throat, he was lording it, playing the boss, the enormous pisspot still in his hands.

Uncle Nestornestorio cautiously gave his assent. He promptly released himself from Drina's grasp. See now, what happened. With a steady stride, keeping his limbs well apart, he made his way across to the illegible gate, they took his cane and hat over to him, he was walking augustly, self-assuredly.

Drina gave me her hand, as faithful as a fairy. She was our salvation. She looked at me and we were struck with

wonder. What can I tell you, what's to tell? What's to tell, what can I tell you? Let me say this. We were bound to love and love and love each other: humbly so. Bound to be. Here where we were yet to be.

And so, standing straight and tall, no, no two ways about it, erect — like someone in his final, fathomless fall — there was Uncle Nestorionestor, striking out among those questionable tombs and, upon my word, he slipped into the Quimbondo cemetery, and vanished.

### THE THIRD BANK OF THE RIVER

“Our father was a responsible, law-abiding, straightforward sort of a man; and had been so since he was a young’un, a boy even, judging by what all manner of level-headed people testified when I enquired about the matter. From what I myself can recollect he didn’t strike you as more peculiar or any sadder than other folk we knew. Just quieter. It was mother who ruled the roost, and who’d be the one to scold us, day in, day out — my sister, my brother and me. But it happened that, one day, our father got a rowboat made for himself.

He was dead serious. He ordered the skiff specially, to be made out of yellowwood, small, hardly room enough for the little seat in the stern, as if the oarsman were only just meant to fit in. But it all had to be properly crafted, chosen for its strength, for its sturdiness in the bows, fit to last in the water for twenty or thirty years. Our mother protested no end against the idea. Did he really mean to say that he, who never used to dabble in such pursuits, was now proposing to take himself off hunting and fishing? Our father didn’t say a thing. Our house, at the time, was still pretty close to the river, little more than a mile or so: thereabouts the river stretched big and deep, silent as ever. So wide you couldn’t properly make out the other bank. And if there’s one thing I just can’t forget, it’s the day the rowboat was ready.

Without either a care or any sign of joy, our father jammed his hat on his head and said goodbye to us, as if he’d made up his mind. He didn’t utter another word, didn’t grab his bundle of provisions and clothes, said nothing by way of counsel. And mother, we thought she was going to fly into a rage, but she just stood there ashen-faced, livid ...bit her bottom lip and growled at him: “If you leave, you

can just stay away, and never come back!” Our father thought better than to answer her. He glanced meekly over at me, waving to me to take a few steps along with him. Mother’s temper scared me, but I obeyed anyhow. I was encouraged by the direction things were taking, enough to make up my mind and ask: “Father, will you take me with you, in that rowboat of yours?” He just gazed back at me and gave me his blessing, signalling to me to go home. I made as if I would, but turned around one last time, at the gully in the woods, I just had to know. Our father got in the skiff and cast off with his oars. And away the boat drifted — together with its shadow, like an alligator, long, as long could be.

Our father didn’t return. He hadn’t gone anywhere. He was just carrying out this idea he’d thought up, to stay there in those wide open stretches of the river, half-way across, always in his boat, never to leave it again, ever. Everyone was appalled by the strangeness of it, but it was true. Something there had never been the like of, and it was actually happening. Our relatives, our neighbours and acquaintances all gathered together and sat in conclave.

Our mother, in her embarrassment, conducted herself with great discretion; on account of which everyone’s thoughts about father went straight to the explanation of which no-one would speak: that he was crazy. Unless, there again, some thought, it could be the payment of a pledge; or that father was perhaps troubled by some ugly-looking disease or other, leprosy maybe, and was exiling himself to live out a different destiny, both near and far from his family. Rumoured reports, there were, from various people — passers-by, river-folk, even some who lived way over yonder on the far bank — describing how our father would never be seen landing his boat, not in any nook or cranny, day or night, how he roamed up and down the river, adrift

all alone. So, then, both our mother and our kinsfolk agreed: that whatever supplies he might have, hidden away in the skiff, must be running out; and as for him, either he must come ashore and set off on his travels, forever, which at least was more in keeping with what was right and proper, or he must give up on the idea once and for all and come home.

That's where they were wrong. I was the one who'd taken it upon myself every day to bring him whatever little bit of food I could pilfer: I had the idea that very first night, when our folks set about lighting fires on the river-bank, and in their glow people prayed and called out. Then, the next day, I turned up with some lumps of muscovado sugar, a loaf of cornbread and a bunch of bananas. I spotted our father at long last after an hour I thought would never pass: there was nothing else around but him, sitting far and away, in the stern of the boat, afloat there on the river's smooth surface. He saw me, and yet he didn't row over in my direction, didn't make any signal. I showed him what there was to eat, stowed it in the hollow of a rock in the river-bank, safe from any meddling creature and dry from the rain and dew. I did this over and over again without fail, for a long while after. Later on, what a surprise I got: our mother knew all about this task I'd taken on, except she pretended she didn't; she herself would leave out some leftovers for the taking, so as my job would be easier. Mother wasn't much of a one to show her feelings.

She sent for our uncle, her brother, to help out on the farm and with her business dealings. She sent for the schoolmaster, to attend to us children. She made the priest undertake one day to get himself garbed up in his robes, at the shore's edge, and utter a few words of exorcism, calling on father to do what was right and give up this woeful, wilful business. Another time she fixed up for two soldiers

to come by and give him a bit of a scare. All to no avail. Father would steer clear, hazily half-glimpsed, plying to and fro in his rowboat, letting no-one come close enough to touch or talk. Not even the newspapermen, just a while back, when they brought a motorboat and tried to take his photograph, they couldn't get the better of him either: father disappeared off to the other shore, steered the boat into the swamp, miles of it there is, in amongst the reeds and bushes, and he alone knew his way, inching through the darkness of that place.

We had to get used to it. Tough though, a thing like that, you didn't ever really get used to it, not deep down. As for me, I reckon that, weighing up what I did or didn't want, I was with my father all the way: which set me thinking all over again. About how hard it was, not being able, any which way, to understand how he could bear it. Day and night, come rain or shine, in the heat, the damp night air, and in the awful chills mid-season, with no path to follow, just his old hat on his head, week after week, month after month, year after year — and no heed for the life that was fast running out. He wouldn't ever make a landing on either of the two banks, nor on the islands or shallows in the river, and never again did he set foot on soil or grass. At least, to be sure, so as to get in some sleep, he'd moor the skiff at the tip of an island, tucked away somewhere. But he wouldn't build a campfire on the beach, or enjoy the fullness of its light, nor did he ever strike a match again. The food he consumed was a scrap of nothing; even from what we stowed away in between the roots of the banyan tree, or in the stone cubby-hole in the riverbank, he'd take very little, not nearly enough. Wouldn't he get sick? And what about the ceaseless effort, his arms straining to mind the boat's course, even when the floods were rising, in full spate, just when in the thrust of the river's mighty



current it all heaves perilously forward, those dead animals' bodies and tree-trunks hurtling — in dread danger of dashing down on you? And he never spoke another word, not to anyone. And nor did we speak of him ever again. We just thought about him. No, there was no forgetting father; and if, just for a while, we seemed to forget, it was only to be roused again, suddenly, by his memory, when we had some other cause to be scared.

My sister got married; our mother wouldn't let her have a party, though. We imagined him, when there was some especially tasty food to eat; just as we would on a cosy evening, and father, out there on one of those forlorn nights when it's raining cold and hard, with nothing but his hand and a gourd to bail the water from the storm out of the rowboat. Occasionally some family friend would reckon I was becoming more and more like my father. But I knew that by now he'd grown long hair and a beard, long nails, that he was mean and skinny, he'd gotten all black with the sun and all that hair on his body, looking like some kind of animal, nearly naked he was, even though he did have the clothes we'd provide him with from time to time.

He didn't even want to hear from us; did he have no affection left? But it was out of affection, out of respect, that whenever people praised me, as they sometimes did on account of some good conduct on my part, I'd say: — *"It was father who taught me one day to do it that way..."*; which wasn't exactly right; it was a lying sort of truth. Seeing as how he didn't remember and didn't want to hear from us anymore, why, then, didn't he move up or downstream, to other parts, in the unfindable faraway? He alone must know. But my sister had a baby son, and she got it into her head that she wanted to show him his grandson. We all came down to the riverside, and a fine day it was, my sister in a white dress, the one she'd worn

on her wedding day, she held the baby up in her arms, her husband held the parasol to shield them both. We called out, waited. Father didn't appear. My sister wept, we all wept in each other's arms.

My sister moved away with her husband, far away from here. My brother made up his mind and left for a town somewhere. The times were changing, the way the times do in their unhurried haste. Mother ended up leaving too, to go and live the rest of her days with my sister, she'd aged somewhat by now. I stopped here, the only one left behind. I couldn't ever consider marrying. I stayed there, with all my worldly goods. Father needed me, I know he did — in his driftings on the river's lonely wastes — and without having to account for his actions. It did happen that, when I actually tried to find out, and I was resolute in my enquiries, what I heard tell was that at some time or other my father had supposedly revealed the explanation to the man who had got the rowboat ready for him. But that man had now died, and no-one had any knowledge or any recollection of anything else. Just cock and bull stories with no sense to them, like on the occasion, back in the early days, when the first river-floods arrived, and the rains wouldn't stop, and everyone feared it was the end of the world, and they said that father was the wise one just like Noah, and that as such he'd got the boat ready in expectation; well, maybe I do vaguely remember something about it now. I wouldn't malign my father. And by this time my first few white hairs were beginning to show.

I am a man of sad words. What was I so, so guilty of? There was my father, forever absent: and the river-iver-iver, the river — perpetually posing the possible. I was suffering the beginnings of old age by now — this life of mine was just a lingering. I had my own ailments, my worries, here down below, fits of weariness, limping

rheumatism. And what of him? Why? He must really be suffering. At his age, sooner or later, wasn't his strength going to give out, wasn't he going to let the boat capsize, or just float feebly along in the river-race, and plunge into the torrent hours further downstream, over the raging waterfall into all that ferment and death? It was heartrending. He was out there, without the peace and quiet I had. I'm guilty of I don't know what, of raw, naked pain, in my innermost being. I could have — if only things had been different. And an idea began to take shape in my mind.

I didn't even sleep on it. Am I crazy? No. In our house, we didn't use to say the word *crazy*, we never said it ever again, all those years, no-one was ever accused of being crazy. No-one is crazy. Or else, everyone is. I just upped and went there. With a handkerchief, so there'd be more to see when I waved. I was absolutely in my right mind. I waited. At long last, first here, then over there, it appeared, his shape. There he was, sitting in the stern. There he was, within earshot. I called out a few times. And I spoke of what was so pressing, I solemnly swore, I had to raise my voice: — "*Father, you are an old man, you've done your stint... You can come home now sir, you don't need to go on any longer... Come home, and I, right now, whenever, whichever, I'll take your place, sir, in the boat!...*" And so saying, my heart began to beat at a steadier pace.

He heard me. He stood up. He worked the oars in the water, steered over towards me, he was in agreement. And suddenly I trembled deeply: because just before, he had raised his arm in a gesture of greeting — the first after so many years had gone by! And I just couldn't... Out of terror, my hair standing on end, I ran, took flight, got the hell out of there, acted like I was demented. For he had seemed to me to come from... the beyond. And I'm begging, begging, begging for his forgiveness.

I felt the severe cold that comes with fear, and soon fell ill. I know that no-one ever heard from him again. Am I a man, after a failure like that? I am the one who never was, the one who will remain silent. I know now it is too late, and I fear I will soon reach my life's end, in the shallows of this world. But all I ask then, is that at the point of death at least I too am taken and laid in an insignificant little boat, on that unceasing race of water, with endless banks alongside: and down the river-run, out over the river-ride, deep into the river-dive — I, the river.”

## SOROCO, HIS MOTHER, HIS DAUGHTER

That carriage had been standing in the siding since the day before, it had come up with the express from Rio, and there it was, on the nearside track at the station concourse. It wasn't any ordinary passenger-carriage, but a first-class one, except posher, all new looking. You pay attention, and you'd pick out the differences. Divided up like that into two, with bars at the windows in one of the compartments, like in a jail, for the prisoners. Everyone knew that in a little while it would be trundling back again, coupled to the express from down the line so as to make up the train. It was going to be used to take two women far away, forever. The train from the backlands would be along at 12.45.

There was already quite a gathering of people waiting beside the carriage. They didn't want to get all sad, so they chatted, each of them vying with the rest as to who could talk most sensibly, as if they knew better than everyone else what was supposed to happen and when. Still more people kept arriving — a real commotion. Nearly at the end of the concourse, they were, by the loading-pen for the cattle, just before the signal-box, near the stacks of timber. Soroco was going to bring the two women along, as arranged. Soroco's mother was elderly, around seventy or more. The daughter, she was his only child. Soroco was a widower. Apart from those two, he wasn't known to have any relatives at all.

It was the time of day when the sun was at its strongest — people were looking for any way they could to get beneath the shade of the cedar trees. The carriage made you think of some round-bottomed dugout run aground, a ship even. Everyone was staring at it: in the glinting midday air it looked as though it was twisted, standing bolt upright on each of its ends. The upturned bulging belly of its roof

was gleaming black. It was like some godforsaken, unforgiving, ownerless invention, beyond anyone's imagining, something your eyes would never get used to. Where it was headed for, where it would take the two women, was a place called Barbacena, far, far away. To the poor, places always seem further away.

The Stationmaster appeared in his yellow uniform, with his black book and his green and red flags under his arm. — *"Go and see if they've put fresh water in the carriage..."* — he ordered. Then the brakeman went and fiddled with the coupling hoses. Someone announced: — *"They're coming!..."* They were pointing to Lower Street, where Soroco lived. He was a man and a half, brutishly built, with a large face and a wispy, yellow-stained beard, and wore sandals on his two big feet: the children were scared of him; most of all, of his voice, which wasn't so much loud as deep, quickly dwindling to a reedy twang. They were making their way along now, accompanied by their entourage.

Then they came to a halt. His daughter — the young woman — had begun to sing, raising her arms in the air, but the song didn't quite take off, either in the melody or in the saying of the words — neither of the two. The young woman turned her eyes heavenward, just like the saints or like people who are spellbound, she was outlandishly decked out, with a wondrous look about her. Bits of cloth and paper, in all different colours, a pointed cap over her flowing hair, billowing beneath all manner of assorted items of clothing, ribbons and bands trailing from her — fandangles: crazy stuff. The old lady was all dressed in black, with a black shawl, and she was nodding gently in time. They weren't so very different, in fact they resembled each other.

Soroco was walking arm in arm with them both, one on

each side of him. You might have been deceived into thinking they were entering a church, for a wedding. It was a melancholy sight. It looked like a funeral. Everyone stood to one side, the throng of people trying not to stare at her, on account of all that eccentricity and weird behaviour that were so laughable, and on account of Soroco — so it wouldn't seem they were ignoring him. Today he was wearing high shoes, a jacket and a big hat, he'd put on his best clothes, his rags and tatters. And he was reserved, buttoned-up, meek and humble. They all paid him their respects, gave him their condolences. He replied: — "*May God repay you...*"

What they were all saying to each other was that Soroco had had no end of patience. He wasn't going to miss those poor deranged creatures, it was actually a relief. There was no cure for what was wrong with them, and they'd never be coming back, not ever. To begin with, Soroco had put up with all the unhappiness he'd had to go through, living with the two of them, he'd battled with it. Then, as the years went by, they got worse, and he couldn't manage any more, he had to ask for help, he'd had no choice. They had to come to his aid, to look out for him, and decide on the best measures to be taken for his well-being. It was the Government who was paying for everything, and who had the carriage sent down. And so, as a consequence, they would now bear the cost of keeping the two women, each in a different asylum. All soon to come.

Suddenly the old lady left Soroco's arm, and went and sat at the foot of the steps up to the carriage. — "*She won't do anything, Mister Station-master...*" — said Soroco softly: — "*She doesn't even answer when you call her...*" At that the young woman took up her singing again, turned towards the people, towards the empty space above them, her face a picture of stunned repose, it wasn't that she wanted to

make a show of herself, she was just acting out the impossible, grand old days of yesteryear. But they saw the old lady give her a magical look, as of some age-old presentiment — of unbounded love. And, beginning quietly, but then with her voice gathering strength, she, too, took up the other woman's selfsame song, that no one could understand, following her example. Now they were singing together, singing without end.

And then it was very nearly time for the train to be arriving, they had to finish off the preparations, get the two women aboard the carriage with its windows and their latticework grille. Swallowed up just like that, in a second, without any farewells, for they wouldn't be able to understand any of it. Going along with them on this benevolent mission, on the long journey, were Nenego, lively and high-spirited, and José Abençoadado, a very cautious soul, they would be there to keep them in hand, every step of the way. And some young lads climbed up into the carriage, too, carrying their bundles and bags, and their things to eat, plenty of them, they weren't going to go short, not with all those parcels of bread. Finally, Nenego appeared one last time on the platform to signal that everything was in order. They wouldn't be any trouble.

And now indeed, all that could be heard was the heartening sound of their carolling, that evocative reel testifying to the manifold changes of this life that could inflict their grief on you, passing sentence with no due regard, none at all, for the whys and wherefores, only for what had been, what was to come.

Soroco.

If only it would all be over and done with. The train pulling in, the engine manoeuvring separately to pick up the carriage. The train whistled and went on its way, leaving forever.



Soroco didn't wait for everything to disappear off into the distance. He didn't even look. He just stood there, hat in hand, more square-jawed and unhearing than ever — which made him somehow all the more amazing. There the sad fellow stood, irrevocably, the few words he might have said, stifled. Suffering this way things had of being, in the boundless emptiness, beneath his burden, uncomplaining, an example to everyone. And they told him: — *"That's the way of the world..."* Everyone was misty-eyed, awe-struck with respect for him. All of a sudden they all felt a great fondness for Soroco.

He shook himself, as if breaking free from something that had never happened, and turned to go. He was going home, as if he were going somewhere far away, beyond all reckoning.

But then he stopped. Such a strangeness came over him, he seemed to be about to lose his very self, and cease to be. In an excess of spirit, as it were, beyond all meaning. And what happened was something no one could have anticipated: who could have made sense of it? All of a sudden — he burst into song, full-throated, loud, but just to himself — and it was the very same, crazy song the two women had been singing all that time. He sang and sang without end.

A chill, a sinking feeling passed over the crowd of people — just momentarily. The people... And there was nothing prearranged about it, no one had any notion of what was going on: everyone, all at once, out of sorrow for Soroco, began to join in, too, with that aimless singing. And with their voices raised so high! Everyone walking with him, with Soroco, and singing, how they sang, as they walked behind him, those furthest back almost running, no one was to be left out of the singing. It was something you would never, ever be able to forget. There wasn't an event to

compare to it.

Now the people were really taking Soroco home. They were going, along with him, wherever that song was going.

João Guimarães Rosa was born in 1908 in the interior of Minas Gerais, the largest and most diverse of Brazil's southeastern states. Here, besides the country's third city, the state capital of Belo Horizonte, where Guimarães Rosa received his medical degree in 1930, one can find a variety of landscapes: eighteenth-century mining towns, the rolling hills where the traditional economy of coffee and dairy farming thrived and, stretching away to the far north, the forbidding, drought-stricken ranges of the backlands, or *sertão*. During the 1930s and 40s, Brazil's so-called Regionalist writers depicted landscapes such as this in broadly social realist colours, documenting and denouncing their inhabitants' poverty and exclusion from the mainstream of the nation's life. Guimarães Rosa brought an entirely new literary vision to bear on the experience of the rural interior and by the time of his death in 1967, he had singlehandedly reinvented the mythical and cultural significance of the *sertão* — the perennial Other of Brazil's coastal, urban civilisation — and had simultaneously created a new literary language adequate to do it.

However, although best known for his definitive novel on that theme, *The Devil to Pay in the Backlands* (*Grande sertão: veredas*) (1956), Guimarães Rosa's literary universe is not confined exclusively to the epic space of the *sertão* itself, with its cowhands, ranchers and feuding gunmen. In fact, as is clear from this volume of short stories gathered from the collections *Primeiras histórias* (1962) and *Estas estórias* (1969),\* he was the master of an astonishing variety of narrative situations, registers and voices. These could range from a child's bittersweet discovery of life's beauty and transience in 'The Bounds of Happiness', to the schizophrenic, stream-of-

consciousness monologue of a half-Indian, convinced he is a blood relation of the wildcats he used to hunt in 'The Jaguar'; from a would-be scientist's obsessive and ultimately insane pursuit of his own, elusive mirror-image in 'The Mirror' to poignant, disturbing and even grotesquely comical dramas of family conflict and disintegration, whether the anonymous folk of the rural interior ('Soroco, His Mother, his Daughter') or the oligarchic dynasties who rule over them ('In the Name of the Grandfather' [Os chapéus transeuntes]). But at the heart of all these stories, and of the extraordinary prose-poetry in which they are written, is a fundamental, unifying principle: the frontier, the borderland, the between-place — the 'third bank' of the river — where destinies, relationships, identities and words all exist in an endless state of flux.

In one of Guimarães Rosa's most moving short stories, 'Soroco, his Mother, his Daughter' (Soroco, sua mãe, sua filha), a grandmother and granddaughter, driven mad by bereavement, are sent off to a distant asylum by their longsuffering son and father. As their train pulls away, Soroco, lost for words, finds himself compelled to intone the strange, wailing song with which the two women have been consoling themselves. The song is a testimony "to the manifold changes of this life that could inflict their grief on you, passing sentence with no due regard, none at all, for the whys and wherefores, only for what had been, what was to come." Soon, irresistibly, the entire village takes up the melody in a collective expression of sorrow for the loss, the dispersal and disorientation suffered by human beings in a world beset by change. And in this instinctive, ritual act of communion, Soroco, whose sense of self had been shattered by his burden of guilt and solitude, now discovers that he is not, after all, alone but has been restored to some more transcendent place of belonging: "Now the people

were really taking Soroco home. They were going, along with him, wherever that song was going.” What ordinary language alone could make no sense of, then, has been transformed by the poetry of song, reconstituting the structures of social and individual identity that the volatility of experience appeared to have destroyed.

This faith in the redemptive, transformative, even magical power of poetic language, as both a register of, and a creative response to, a world in flux, is perhaps the most compelling feature of Guimarães Rosa’s work, and the key to his reputation as Brazil’s leading post-War writer of fiction. It is this, especially, that defines him as the quintessential Brazilian Modernist, at the centre of a tradition linking writers such as Mário de Andrade and Clarice Lispector, whose originality, like his, lay above all in their capacity to reinvent the literary potential of the Portuguese language in the most revolutionary, utterly individual ways. His commitment to the revitalisation of prose narrative by means of an unorthodox combination of techniques and resources — ancient, popular and experimental — is what underlies his readers’ certainty that they are in the presence of a writer who is not only acutely in touch with his own country’s cultural and linguistic traditions, but whose sensitivity to the *Zeitgeist* is absolutely cosmopolitan, too.

Indeed, Guimarães Rosa’s approach to the study of foreign languages bears out this attitude: “I believe that studying the spirit and mechanics of other languages is a great aid to a deeper understanding of the national language. Above all, however, when one studies for amusement, delight and recreation.” Clearly, these or other motives were not in short supply, for before the age of seven he had begun to study French on his own account, and two years later he was tackling Dutch in the company of a Franciscan monk,

before taking up German at school in Belo Horizonte. According to an interview given to a cousin,

“I can speak: Portuguese, German, French, English, Spanish, Italian, Esperanto, a little Russian; I can read: Swedish, Dutch, Latin and Greek (clutching a dictionary); I can understand some German dialects; I have studied the grammars of the following: Hungarian, Arabic, Sanskrit, Lithuanian, Polish, Tupi, Hebrew, Czech, Finnish and Danish; I have delved a little into a few others. But my command of them all is poor..”

And if this cosmopolitan perspective on the national language and culture means that it is therefore valid to compare Guimarães Rosa to, say, Joyce, Faulkner or Borges, as many have done, this is not because he shares with them some spurious “universality” that relegates what is local or culturally specific to secondary importance, as merely a matter of regionalist colouring emblematic of a kind of Third-World exoticism. Nor is the distinctiveness of Guimarães Rosa’s universe of backwoods travellers, children, peasants and cowboys diminished merely because we know it is another manifestation of those world-historic shifts that have increasingly globalised the modern experience, bringing the remotest rural societies and the heartlands of industrialism into close proximity. On the contrary, we are struck by the intensity with which these characters live in the maelstrom of a modernity that is wholly theirs, no faint, peripheral echo of the metropolitan experience but original in every sense, enriching and expanding our understanding of the modern condition with a wisdom and poetry that often sound both more ancient and more sophisticated than our own.

As a writer whose perennial theme is the journey — life’s journey of challenge and discovery, the existential journey into solitude, alienation and madness, and the

journey towards the mystery of death — Guimarães Rosa could hardly have chosen a more appropriate country than Brazil, whose society is largely the product of endless epic, and often tragic, journeys: the flight and exile of those indigenous people who survived the Conquest, the Middle Crossing of the African slave population, the successive waves of immigration from Europe, the Middle East and Asia, and the migrations of starving or landless peasants from the backlands to the coastal cities. His literary imagination was doubtless shaped by this collective historical memory but also, undeniably, by his personal experience of the world beyond his nation's frontiers.

On the one hand, many Brazilians would no doubt identify Guimarães Rosa's view, that "life on this planet is chaos, freefall, an essential, irreparable disorder, all out of focus", as one particularly shaped by their own country's recent history of modernisation — prodigious growth accompanied by a sense of permanent crisis and imminent disaster. His decision to abandon his early medical career has been explained as due in large part to an extreme sense of impotence in the general face of the world's ills and suffering, but this is something he must have felt especially acutely as a pitifully under-resourced country doctor in 1930s Brazil, the period which led to his first collection of short stories, *Sagarana* (1946). On the other hand, during his later diplomatic career in the wider world, too, Guimarães Rosa came to know another kind of precariousness, that induced by the phenomenon of war. As Brazil's Consul in Hamburg from 1938 onward, he had several brushes with death, returning home one night to find his house transformed into rubble. In 1942, when his government severed diplomatic relations with Nazi Germany, he was arrested and later exchanged for some German counterparts detained in Brazil; not, however,

before he had protected and aided the escape of a number of Jews pursued by the regime, something for which he and his wife were later publicly honoured by the State of Israel.

But it was the climate of change in Brazil after the War, especially following Guimarães Rosa's return home from Europe in 1951, that seems to have embodied his ambivalent vision of a world on the move most expressively. In 1958 he saw first-hand the evidence of this latest phase of urban-industrial modernisation, spearheaded and symbolised on a monumental scale by the new capital of Brasília. He described the building of the city as "advancing with unbelievable speed and enthusiasm: the way the Russians or North Americans might do it." Interestingly, however, his most intense and abiding memory of those few days near the prodigious construction site was a dramatically different one: the sunrise every morning, when "a huge, fabulously beautiful, multi-coloured toucan would come, at 6.15 on the dot, and eat berries in the canopy of a tall tree next to the house."

In his short story entitled 'Treetops' ('Cimos'), Guimarães Rosa was to recount that memory but now, crucially, from the perspective of a small boy. As in 'The Bounds of Happiness' ('As margens da alegria'), the child learns how to compensate for his anxiety when faced with the discovery of historical time — represented by the city's vertiginous, bewildering growth, which he associates with death and loss — by savouring the intensity and beauty of certain epiphanies of renewal, such as the miraculous, "eternal return" of the toucan. In 1926, on the death of a fellow student, the young Guimarães Rosa commented: "People do not die, they become enchanted," something he would repeat on taking up his seat in the Brazilian Academy



of Letters forty-one years later, just three days before his own death. The little protagonist of 'Treetops', whose lost doll stands for the threat of his mother's death, comes to believe in something similar, the possibility of a transcendent eternity, a "somewhere" in memory or in the imagination, where the past can go on existing:

"No, his Little Monkey playmate wasn't lost, in the dark, fathomless deep of the world, not ever. For sure, he'd just be strolling, happening along hereafter, in the other-place, where people and things were always coming and going. The Little Boy smiled at what he'd smiled at, suddenly at one with what he felt: outside the pre-primordial chaos, like the melting apart of a nebula."

Perhaps it is this between-place — "perpetually posing the possible" — that the protagonist's father is searching for in 'The Third Bank of the River' ('A terceira margem do rio'), when he sets himself adrift in a canoe, never to come ashore again: a precarious still-point of equilibrium midway across the current, where real time is suspended, where he is gone but not departed, neither here nor there. Like Guimarães Rosa's *sertão*, it lies at the threshold between mythical and historical time, between an ageless past and the encroaching, turbulent present. It resists the corrosive, dispersive forces of change yet equally refuses to be petrified within the inert, determinate confines of ordinary time and space. But to assume this condition of indeterminacy, of permanent flux, and seek to transcend the volatility of our existence by immersing oneself in it, is both a courageous and a perilous act, as the man's son discovers when he offers to take his place in the boat. For one may be swept away and engulfed altogether or left suspended

in a limbo of insanity, like the lost soul in ‘The Mirror’ (‘O Espelho’), drifting between his reflected self-image and an elusive essence, or the half-Indian Bacuriquirepa in ‘The Jaguar’ (‘Meu tio o iauaretê’), who cannot escape his dual identity: both the hunter and the hunted, both the wildcat and its human killer.

Only a special kind of narrative language could meet the challenge of this journey into indeterminacy, into the unceasing race of the river: a prose that constantly overflows into poetry, that wrestles with the task of objectifying human experience while remaining faithful to its irreducible mystery and fluidity, its ambiguities and contradictions. It was perhaps no accident that Guimarães Rosa’s first, award-winning work of literature was an unpublished volume of poetry (*Magma*, 1936). For, analogous to its subject-matter, the substance of his fiction is language in a state of flux — and therefore essentially poetic —, strangely archaic, rustic and modern all at once, pushing insistently at the bounds of what is unsayable and meaningful. It is a challenge beautifully represented in the little girl Pixie’s endless efforts to tell, and re-tell, the improvised tale of ‘The Audacious Mariner Sets Sail’ (‘Partida do audaz navegante’), in her playfully uninhibited experimentation with the magic of words:

“‘*Zito, is a shark* demented, *or is it explicit or demagogic?*’ Because she liked, this budding poet, to take on serious words like these, that flash glintingly and long in the darkness of our ignorance.”

Only when her seafaring hero’s adventure into the unknown becomes materialised, projected by the children through an imaginative leap onto a humble, fragile lump of cow dung carried off on the flood-tide, can she complete

her story:

*“Now I know. The Aldacious Mariner didn’t go on his own; there! But went aboard with the young lady who he, they, loved each other, they boarded the ship, precisely that. So there. The sea went along with them, aesthetically. They were going but not alone, on the ship, that was growing lovelier and lovelier, the ship... there: and it turned into a glow-worm...”* \*

Real time and mythical time, the language of narrative and of lyricism, have become one, then, bridging the gap between absence and presence, departure and permanence, reconciling the Mariner’s eternal exile on the turbulent sea with the imperative of love and companionship. Guimarães Rosa’s narrative poetry-in-motion is the invention of another space, like Pixie’s Alligator Island, a third bank of multiple, simultaneous possibilities where we can pause momentarily, as if in the eye of the storm, before returning to the flux of our daily lives:

*“Have you ever seen an alligator there?” — teased Pelle. — “No. But you’ve never seen the alligator-not-being-there either. You just see the island. So, the alligator might be there and it might not...”*

David Treece

\* “Partida do audaz navegante”, “As margens da alegria”, “Os cimos”, “O espelho”, “A terceira margem do rio”, “Soroco, sua mãe, sua filha” originally appeared in *Primeiras Histórias* (1962); “Meu tio, o iauaretê” and “Os chapéus transeuntes” originally appeared in the posthumous collection *Estas estórias* (1969).

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